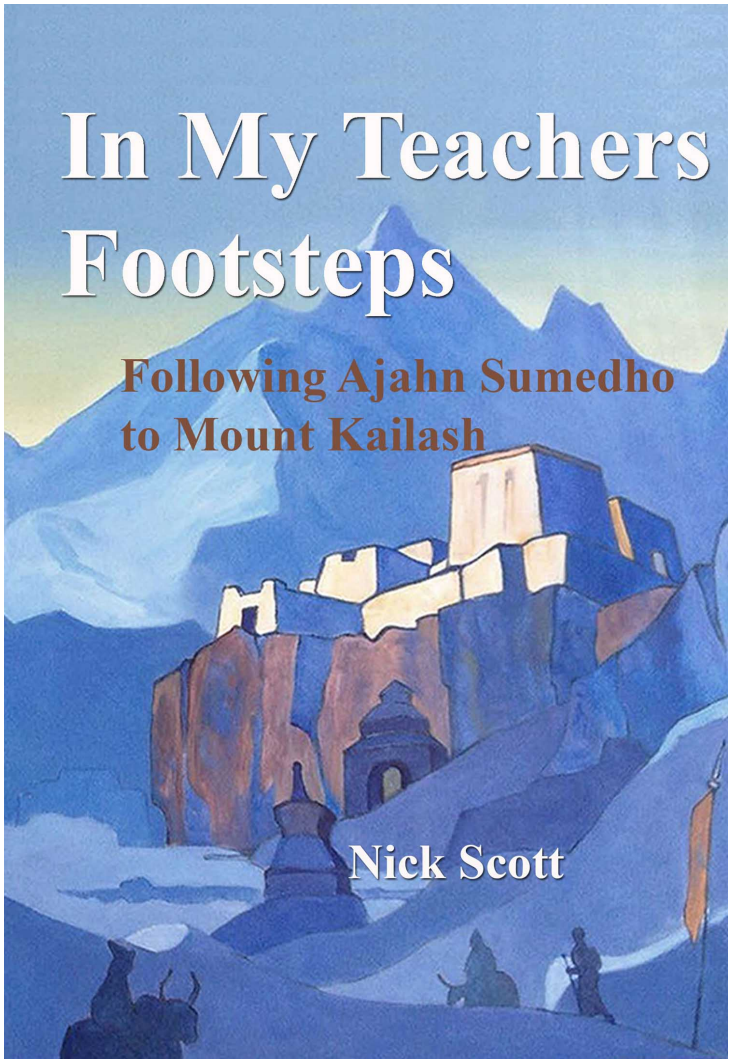
In My Teachers Footsteps
Following Ajahn Sumedho to Mount Kailash
Nick Scott

In My Teacher's Footsteps

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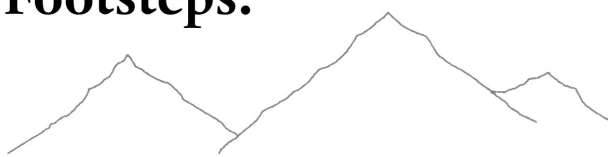

Following Ajahn Sumedho
to Mount Kailash

Nick Scott

The Buddha Educational Foundation
Taiwan

The cover painting is a copy of The Path to Kailas Monastery by Nicholas Roerich, made by George Sharp as a gift to Ajahn Sumedho. The figure at bottom right following a yak is an added depiction of Ajahn Sumedho. It now hangs in his kuti at Wat Pa Ratanawan.

Oil on wood (28"x 48")

Cover design: Nick Scott

In My Teacher's Footsteps:

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To Micheline Sheehy Skeffington.
In gratitude for the love and support
that made both the journey and this book possible.

Looking for peace is like looking for a turtle with a mustache:
you won't find it.
But when the heart is ready, peace will come looking for you.

Ajahn Chah

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Foreword

by Sister Jinho

For centuries, the act of following a spiritual teacher, a master, has been an essential practice in the major religious traditions. The Buddha was an excellent follower before he set off on his own path, having mastered all that his teachers could share. Today, however, many people are unwilling to make such commitment. It can be seen as a lack of intelligence, or a loss of essential autonomy. In my traditional and conservative understanding, it is important when embarking on one's quest for spiritual understanding, to first know the importance and virtue of faithful but reflective following. Hence, it is my delight to introduce this excellent book by Dr Nick Scott, which describes the experiences of following a spiritual teacher, Luang Por Sumedho, both to the holy mountain, Mount Kailash, and as his teacher for life's long spiritual journey.

I first knew Nick through reading of his pilgrimage on foot around the Buddhist Holy sites in India, with his companion, Ajahn Sucitto. Their two wonderful books impressed me greatly, as the tradition of pilgrimage on foot has largely been lost in the Asian Buddhist world. Their books not only contained rich Dharma teachings and historical information, but also they were honest and reflective about their personal difficulties in undertaking this arduous pilgrimage, and full of humour. There was so much of worth to be gained from reading them! Nick's training as a botanist and ecologist, also meant he paid attention to the natural environment, with delightful descriptions of

ecosystems, plants, birds and animals.

This new book is another wonderful account of true pilgrimage, full of insight and profound teaching, and one that is also enjoyable and entertaining. Nick tells the story of how he decided to follow in the footsteps of his master, the challenges he and others encountered during their pilgrimages, and the insights they gained. His teacher Luang Por Sumedho and two of his pilgrimage companions, Ajahn Amaro and Stephen Batchelor, are some of the most eminent figures in the Western Buddhist world. Readers will learn their Dharma understandings and their personalities, in a way not possible in the many books of their teachings. They will also see how the practice of following is not an act of ignorance but rather it is an act of humility, courage and wisdom.

The themes of each chapter, and their titles, coincide with actual stages I have come to recognize from my own practice, so that this book is also a map of the spiritual journey as I have known it. For Asian practitioners, it is particularly inspiring to see how economically privileged Western practitioners have chosen to endure such hardships, when most Buddhist pilgrimages today use buses, planes and comfortable hotels. The book also explores the different approach of both Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism, and of modern 'rational' western Buddhism and the traditional faith based practices of the East. Nick shows that each has its limitations and each can help us if we do not follow blindly.

I am honored to be asked to write this foreword, particularly as a Buddhist nun, as the nuns are so often overlooked in the Theravada and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. A female voice helps to balance a book with mostly men in it, though I am pleased that Nick has included some inspiring women. I also add a pinch of Mahayana flavour to a book already rich in different Buddhist traditions.

This book invites you to walk your own path, face your own limitations and take actions to follow your own teacher to the way of liberation.

I am sure you will enjoy and learn from the adventures and

inner struggles on the spiritual path in the following chapters! So, let's begin now! Bon voyage!

Samaneri Sr. Jinho, 釋常純
Co. Clare, Ireland

Preface

by Nick Scott

Travel accounts are usually straightforward to write and easy to read. The problem, if anything, is that the repetitive 'we went there, then we went there', can become too predictable. Not so this book. This is an account of several walks: those I undertook and those Ajahn Sumedho undertook, journeying to the holy mountain of Mount Kailash, recounted side by side. Each of the walks proved fascinating and both of us were eventually taken to the absolute limit of what we could endure. So you, the reader, are not going to be bored. My concern is that you might be confused. On each walk we have different companions, we visit the same places but at very different times, and Ajahn Sumedho's attempts are recounted not by him, but by several of his companions. To help you, there are maps, most of them at the start of each chapter, and there are photos showing the participants, including group photos where they are named. The first block of photos are for the first half of the book, which describes our journeys to Mount Kailash, and the second block is of the sacred kora, the circling of the mountain which includes climbing a pass of 18,500 feet. As a final aid I give a list of the walks at the book's start, with dates and participants, that you can return to.

I've tried to write something that is of help to others; not just an adventure story. There are themes running through this account important to that other journey to a Holy Mountain, the quest for spiritual understanding. This meant including yet another walk. To help understand Buddhism in Tibet the second

chapter recounts a training walk undertaken with Ajahn Amaro and Stephen Batchelor in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. This also sets up one of the themes: the nature of belief and faith in religious practise. Stephen's sceptical rationality provides a counter to the amazing belief system underpinning the practise of Tibetan Buddhism which we encounter later. To some, it might initially seem I'm siding with Stephen, but that's only because I start by presenting his side. Instead I leave it for you to make up your own mind on this. Personally I find Tibetan Buddhism as valid a path as my own. Both are helped by considering them with an open but sceptical mind.

Another theme is the facing of difficulty and how that can benefit us. It is there in the first chapter, runs through the book and is something I then explore with Ajahn Sumedho at the end. The last chapter includes his reflections on the reasons for pilgrimage, the nature of belief and how understanding the correct way to encounter difficulty is the key to transforming our life. To enable this I've had to be honest about my own struggles, those of my companions and those of Ajahn Sumedho and the others mentioned in this book. While the result is an interesting and exciting 'good read', that is not why I've been so honest. I hope everyone concerned can understand this and forgive me if I have caused any embarrassment.

I've also tried to make this book as accessible as possible for someone who knows nothing of Buddhism or Tibet. I've kept to a minimum the use of Buddhist and foreign terms. The few I've used I've put in italics, defined them at first use, if the context doesn't make their meaning obvious, and also included the important recurring ones in the glossary at the end. Any details that a knowledgeable reader might want to know but which could overload others are confined to the chapter notes also at the book's end. I've only used honorific titles, such as Venerable, Ajahn and Rinpoche, for the most senior of the monastics each time they are mentioned; for the rest I've used them once and after that simply used their name. The chapter notes also include supplementary information on what we encountered and themes

the book considers, some of which was in the original text.

I include a few stories from previous walks with Ajahn Sumedho. There are details that others, wanting to produce hagiography, would have left out. But I'm not interested in worshipping a spiritual teacher who is perfect. Rather, I want to learn how to overcome my own suffering through seeing how they are overcoming theirs. It is this aspect of personal disclosure in Ajahn Sumedho's teaching that I have most appreciated. When we met at the end of writing this account, Ajahn Sumedho told me he too had learned a lot from his own teacher, Ajahn Chah, not being perfect.

I hope you find this book both enjoyable and of benefit.

Nick Scott, Co. Galway, Ireland, 2017.

The Walks

1998 Oct, Pilgrimage to Mount Kailash: Aj. Sumedho, Ven. Sugato, Andrew Yeats, Dr Anne Dew, Alison Gould, Michael, David Johnson, Nick Hodge.

2002 May/June, Pilgrimage to Mount Kailash: Aj. Sumedho, Ven. Pannasaro, Hal Natham, John Levy, Iwana, Lori, Marline, Beverly, Micheline (Hal's Neighbour), Alex Levy.

2013 March/April, Training walk in the Atlas Mountains: Aj. Amaro, Stephen Batchelor, Nick Scott, Micheline Sheehy Skeffington.

2013 May/June, Pilgrimage to Mount Kailash: Aj. Amaro, Ven. Dhammarakkho, Ven. Appamado, Nick Scott, Chris Smith, Rory Hodd.

Prologue

In February of 2012 I climbed a mountain on Connemara's north coast. It was one of those days with which the West of Ireland can surprise you in winter. Much of the time it's wet, with gales blowing in from the Atlantic, one after another, but then suddenly the skies clear to pale blue, the fabulous landscape shines crystal clear, the previously constant wind drops to nothing and the temperature, with the Gulf Stream flowing just off shore, is so mild you can stroll by the sea in shirtsleeves. I was supposed to be on a solitary one-month retreat, but I gave up on meditation, packed some lunch, clambered over the fence behind the cottage and started up the boggy, heathered slope.

By midday, I was standing on the top, breathing heavily, and stunned into internal silence by the view. The dark, blue-green sea way beneath stretched to the northern horizon, still churning from the recent storm. Large waves crashed onto the shore below and white spray shot up and over the reefs and islets scattered over the water's surface beyond. Connemara's mountains, standing about me, were stark against the cloudless sky: Mweelrea, a vast buttress sticking out into the Atlantic to the north with others in its lee; the Twelve Bens to the south, their flanks in camouflage patches of khaki, green and brown, their tops glittering rocky quartz. Looking further to the south, the low winter sun reflected as a white sheet on each distant lake or tarn, giving the thousands of pools on Roundstone bog the look of sequins. Beyond, both to the south and west, there was the sea again, with an intricate

latticed coastline of bays, inlets and headlands, dotted with more islands.

The largest islands, all inhabited, were to the north; further out, sitting in sunshine, each with a delicate fringe of white breakers: Inishbofin, Inishturk, Clare, and, in the distance, Achill, its mountains rising steeply out of the sea. Midway between them was Caher, uninhabited now, but one of the mythical islands of early Celtic Christianity, where monastic communities once led austere lives.

When I had recovered from the climb, I turned to cross the long crest of Binn Chuanna, threading my way between bogs, pools and crags that littered the rounded top. Everything was still, except for the occasional deep croak of a raven and the lonely piping of a small flock of golden plover before, disturbed, they took off and wheeled out of sight. I was heading for Binn Fhraoigh, the other spur of the same mountain

I had to cross a slightly lower col between the two spurs, where, turning back to look towards the sea, the view was so surprising it snatched my breath away. I was looking out across a small mountain tarn, crags to either side, the sky reflected in its surface, to the sea beyond. From this perspective the two waters appeared one. I felt a sudden rush of joy followed closely by an unbidden idea, a wild response to climbing the mountain: 'I should have one last crazy adventure in this life'. I was approaching sixty and I'd thought I'd given up on that kind of thing.

The idea for what the adventure should be followed immediately, fully formed: I would follow Ajahn Sumedho, my teacher, to Tibet's Mount Kailash. Fifteen years before, when he was in his early sixties, and preparing for his pilgrimage to Tibet, I had led him on training walks right here in Connemara. I'd organise a pilgrimage, then write a book both about his attempt to get there and us following in his footsteps, as a way of honouring him and what he has done for me.

The idea came complete, right down to the detail of not choosing who to go with but simply inviting whoever was at the end of a walk that Alex Hart was organising that summer, down

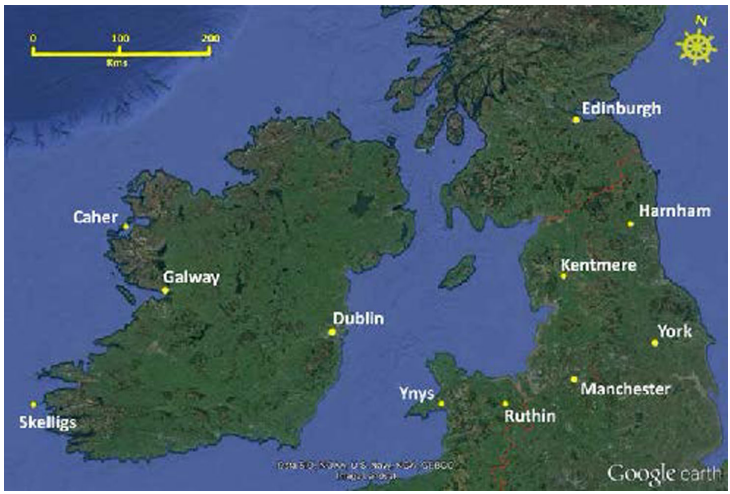
Ireland's west coast. Most would be people I'd been teaching, like Alex. They were young, keen and into adventure, and I was to join them for the last few days.

I'd never actually wanted to go to Mount Kailash. It's in the high-altitude desert of western Tibet: I love nature. I'm not drawn to landscapes known only for spectacular rocky scenery. I also knew how hard it would be. At that altitude breathing is so difficult, one can only shuffle along and pilgrims suffer migraines, vomiting and other aspects of altitude sickness. Every year some of them die. So the idea of the journey wasn't followed by a resounding 'yes!' Instead I was stunned as I realised what I'd have to do. But it's been my practice for years to accept whatever life throws at me. As this journey had come so complete, and seemingly not from me, I felt I had to accept it. I'd go the following year, when I would be in my sixties, and I'd just follow the idea, not be distracted by personal preferences, and see how it panned out.

The initial step came soon afterwards, when I met Andrew Yeats, who'd led Ajahn Sumedho's party in 1998. Andrew was the architect for the Dhamma Hall project I'd supervised, at Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in England, and we needed to meet there to resolve a difficulty with the completion of the cloisters. Our conversation mainly centred on the building project, but I managed to mention Mount Kailash in passing. His brief response was a surprise. "God, that trek! That was the hardest mountain trek I've ever led. By far! And the last! I never did another. That was the only time in my life I've ever come close to hitting someone."

Now, Andrew is the gentlest of characters – he used to be the architect for the Findhorn spiritual community, known for their otherworldliness. So it was very surprising to hear him, of all people, say: "Things got so bad I actually raised my fist and pulled it back – I would have hit someone, smack, right in the face – I only just managed to stop myself. Thank God!"

I thought, "Well, at least it should make a good book" and looked forward to finding out more.



1 Companions on the Path

It was a beautiful autumn day and I was driving south through a rolling landscape of small green fields, wooded lanes and white farm buildings, traversing the Lleyn Peninsula in North Wales. The Snowdonia Mountains rose to my left, the slopes darkening to brown, then topped off with grey. In the distance ahead I could make out the glistening Irish Sea again. I'd crossed from Ireland on the morning ferry to visit Anne Dew, the doctor on Ajahn Sumedho's trek to Mount Kailash. I'd known her before, so knew she suffered from ME, also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, that strange illness where there's no vitality and the person is utterly exhausted by the least of things. I also knew it started after their Mount Kailash pilgrimage and the trauma of that trip. She now lived in a Tibetan Buddhist community tucked away in this corner of North Wales: the Hermitage of the Awakened Heart.

At a signpost marked Criccieth I turned off the main road. There was no problem recalling the next unusual place name: Ynys. But I soon realised finding the actual destination was going to be more difficult: I was now on a small, sunken lane with others branching from it. It ran downhill, over an old arched stone bridge and then started to climb. Ahead, an elderly woman walked downhill towards me. She had grey, dishevelled hair, wire-rimmed glasses and wore an old puffa jacket against the chill of autumn. From below the jacket emerged a Tibetan nun's skirt: burgundy-red, full-length with two long folds at the back. I pulled up beside her, and wound down the window.

"I think I know where you must be from."

She smiled cheerfully. "And you must be Anne's friend. I'll get in

and show you the way."

She directed me along more sunken lanes, with gnarled old trees on their banks, saying no more than necessary. Still, by the time we arrived at an old stone Welsh farmhouse, I was struck by her pleasant lightness. She had me take the entrance drive, past the little car park and a white Tibetan stupa, the traditional Buddhist monument decked out with prayer flags, to the back of the house. It was there I realised my pleasant passenger, who was now disappearing round the corner, had been the teacher, Lama Shenpen Hookham.

I found Anne in the small office beside the front door, working at a computer. Anne is a lanky young woman with long, light hair, and an earnestness about her which is broken regularly by a smile that gives emphasis to her apple cheeks.

"Hi Nick. It's lovely to see you. I've to get this finished. Then we can go to my caravan."

This was a large modern mobile home parked beyond a converted shed and wooden buildings used for accommodation. There we settled on an ample sofa. I got my voice recorder out and asked Anne to tell me what had happened on their pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, from the beginning.

"Well, Nick, it all started with me putting on my rucksack to leave the house. I hadn't noticed a wasp on the strap, and, as I crossed the threshold, it stung me and then fell dead at my feet. I stood there a bit stunned and I remembered you once telling me that trips with Ajahn Sumedho nearly always go ridiculously well. But if they go wrong, they can really go wrong.

"Then my parents drove me to the airport. The others had met at Amaravati Monastery the night before, but I'd had my sister's wedding: I was the bridesmaid."

"Wow, that was an important day."

"Yes, my only sister, there's only the two of us. It was wonderful. But that's why I got to the airport before the others. When I went to check in they said, 'Oh, your flight went three hours early'! I mean, when does a flight ever go early? They explained they'd tried to contact us and how our party were the

only passengers they'd failed with, but all I could think was: 'This trip is going to be difficult…"

I'd already heard about the missed flight as I'd been to see Andrew Yeats. "It was with one of those Middle East airlines, Gulf Air I think," he'd told me, "and the head sheik, or whoever, told them to fly to Bangladesh with aid for the flooding. I was the only contact and I was at Amaravati with no one at home. That was before mobile phones. So they couldn't get hold of us. They did agree it was their fault, but they had no direct flight for several days so we took three planes over two days, hopping all over the Middle East. Spent a lot of time in transfer lounges, and two nights in hotels. One was in a country I've never heard of! Anyway, as a consequence, we arrived in Kathmandu nearly two days late."

Andrew had told me this as we climbed the Lake District hills. He lives there in the small vale of Kentmere, tucked out of the way of the hordes of summer visitors, in a renovated farmhouse; the converted outbuildings his studio and offices. We walked the Kentmere horseshoe together. On his own, he ran it, he told me. With stops, it took us most of the day, and I couldn't have done it much faster; the recording of our conversation is dominated by my heavy breathing as we climbed. But then Andrew is like some kind of wonder man: a successful architect specialising in ecological buildings, a mountaineer and a sailor. He's also good looking with tousled blonde hair, has a lovely home and family, is sensitive, highly principled, and surrounded by beauty. With Andrew, the Buddhist concept of the heavenly realms often comes to mind: places of good fortune where one can be reborn if one leads an exemplary life.

I'd started by asking him how he came to arrange the pilgrimage.

"You remember Sugato, lanky young American monk, really enthusiastic?"

"Yeah, he was at Harnham once. But he disrobed a good while ago."

"Well, he and some other young monks were hanging out with Sumedho on his sixtieth birthday and someone asked if there was

anything he wanted to do before he got too old and Sumedho replied he'd like to do the Mount Kailash pilgrimage. So Sugato asked me to organise it. He knew I led mountain treks, but I don't think he knew I'd already been to Mount Kailash…"

"I didn't know that, either!"

"It was a long time ago, before the Chinese let foreigners into Tibet. I'd seen this picture of the mountain on a retreat at a Tibetan Monastery in Dharamsala, and me and another guy, Peter, decided to try. We met someone else in Gilgit, and we all swapped our clothes with Ulgar tribesmen and paid for a lift, hidden in the back of two trucks crossing the border from Pakistan. The other two were spotted at a check post. Peter was six foot two with dreadlocks and Martin had bleach-blonde hair and blue eyes. I looked more like an Ulgar and I put dust on my face. I was also more discreet. At one stage my driver gave the local Police Chief a ride down the road. I sat right next to him, said nothing and looked down."

"So you did the whole Mount Kailash pilgrimage, carried your own stuff, hell of a lot of Tibetans and no one else?"

"Yeah, just me. Some Tibetan nuns took me in to their convent as I was sick. They looked after me, fed me, and then I carried on. It was a pretty amazing experience. But afterwards I was caught trying to hitch-hike on to Lake Manasarovar. I hadn't seen a police car behind a lorry I tried to get a lift from."

"So what happened then?"

"We'd decided to say we'd come from Chengdu in China as they took you back to where you'd entered. We had the Chinese visas, you see. So I got this lift right across Tibet. That was great. The two Tibetan policemen enjoyed it, too.

"I was really inspired by Mount Kailash: the Tibetan people were just so happy. I realised they had something I wanted. So I went to Thailand to become a Buddhist monk. I ended up at Wat Pa Nanachat where I became a pakow." That's a lay man wearing white, with head shaved, waiting to go forth as a Buddhist monk. "That's where I first met Ajahn Sumedho. He came to visit and we were all invited to his kuti. We spent the morning there hanging

out with him. The coffee was like treacle: so strong I thought I was on drugs."

"Did you tell him when you went to Kailash that you'd met him before?"

"I don't think so. There were lots of us, so he'd not remember me. I left soon after; it was too hot. I couldn't cope with that."

It was left up to Andrew to assemble the rest of the Mount Kailash party, as he did each year for the two Himalayan treks he usually ran. This trek he paid for himself with Sugato's parents paying for the monks. He invited Anne Dew, who was an old friend of his partner, Lucy – she practised Buddhist meditation and had been working as a doctor with Tibetan refugees in India – and David Johnson, who founded Lam Rim, the Tibetan Buddhist centre in South Wales. Andrew had designed his eco-friendly home nearby. "Then there was a couple: Alison used to teach me Tai Chi when we lived in York. She heard about the trip and asked if she and her partner could come. I thought she would be a real asset. She's really helpful, selfless, and she was a nurse. So she could help if Ajahn Sumedho had any problems. But I didn't know Michael: I'd done Tai Chi with him but you don't get to know someone when you only see them teaching. He was a keen photographer, so he was to take the photos."

When we got back to his house, Andrew gave me what information he could on their original pilgrimage. It wasn't much, he explained, as he wasn't great at remembering details, and hadn't found the box that held the maps, hand-outs and correspondence. But he could confirm their route. They had started in the Himalayan foothills in the far west of Nepal and followed an old trading route, trekking for five or six days along the upper Karnali valley and then over a high pass to one of only two border crossings into Tibet from Nepal. This one has no road leading to it. These days nearly everyone, including those going to Mount Kailash, crosses by the other one, but Andrew had wanted to follow this traditional route as it passed though the most remote and least developed part of Nepal, a region known as Humla.

Andrew also gave me the contact details for the others in the party. Afterwards, over dinner, when I said I'd start by visiting Anne, his partner, Lucy, asked me to let them know how she was. "I'm worried, Nick. I think she's taken too much on. She doesn't think of herself. But now she's sick and she's Shenpen's only helper, doing all the booking and running the place, and looking after Shenpen. I'm worried she's being used too much. We did try to visit her when we were in Wales, but they were having a retreat."

When I met her, I found Anne wasn't being used. She was being helped by a very good teacher. After more than ten years of her illness, Anne was finally getting better. She reckoned the turning point was recognising the illness as part of her practice – not something in the way, but something to be learnt from. That was what Shenpen had helped her to see. As a result, she now understood the reactions and movements of her mind that caused it and could avoid following them. She herself had been making herself ill. But it hadn't been easy to see that, she told me: first, things had to get much worse before she could start getting better.

By the time Anne met Shenpen she'd been forced to give up both work and her Brighton flat, and was living at home with her parents. She had an interview, after which Shenpen would phone her at home to offer encouragement, eventually inviting Anne to stay at the hermitage. There things initially went downhill. Anne wanted to be of use, to help, so she would exhaust herself. Then Shenpen's two main helpers left, leaving only Anne, after which Shenpen herself got cancer and both of Anne's parents died. She ended up unable to leave her own bed – just going to the toilet would leave her drained for hours. Anne recounted all this in the restrained manner of a Victorian explorer recounting an expedition's hair-raising aspects, playing down every adversity. 'Hard' and 'difficult' were the strongest words she used, and then reluctantly, with no emphasis in her voice. But to me it seemed like she'd been through hell.

The worst part lasted six months. But there, unable to do anything else, she started to study her illness. She found a training programme helping people with ME and joined it. Encouraged by Shenpen, she had steadily got herself better, regaining her vitality. She still felt wary of her own mind, Anne told me, like a reformed alcoholic always on the watch for temptation, but now she wouldn't want anything different. She now realised that both the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and the resulting illness were both blessings; only with them would she have ended up at the hermitage. And only there and only when she was so bad that there was nothing she could do for anyone else, could she help herself. Like any addict, she had to hit bottom before she could get better. Now she recognised how driven she once was, and how that drive had connected with her view that everyone else had been more important than herself.

After the interview Anne took me for a walk along the country lanes. It was a novelty seeing someone I recalled being so wasted, striding along enjoying the countryside. As we walked she talked about the hermitage where a strong part of the life was the devotional Tibetan practices. I'd spotted a row of small bronze Buddhas waiting on a side table, the head of each wrapped in a small piece of white cloth. Intrigued, I asked why. Anne explained how each was waiting to be filled during the upcoming retreat with relics and small scrolls inscribed with mantras. The bases are sealed then the white cloth is removed, as until then, the Tibetans believe evil spirits can get in through their eyes.

The other strong aspect of their life was generosity, something Shenpen both encouraged and practised herself. What Shenpen was really good at, Anne told me, was giving private interviews. She so enjoyed the interviews that she was energised by them, and Anne had known her give twenty-six, one after another, with only short breaks to eat.

I asked what had happened to Shenpen's husband, Mike Hookham. Was he dead?

"No. He's now Lama Rigdzin Shikpo. He's a recognised master of the profound Buddhist teachings on sunyata, emptiness."

"But I thought they used to teach together. They were students of Trungpa from the '60s and all that. Trungpa even married them, didn't he? Did he leave her for another woman?"

"That's not what's said," Anne told me slightly stiffly. "They're still Dharma companions, and she still sees him as one of her teachers. He was here for the official opening by a Tibetan Lama. But it was a very hard time for her."

"So did he go off with a younger disciple?"

"She wasn't that much younger…"

"I thought from the perspective of the great Tibetan teaching on emptiness, everything was equal. If you're a master of it, why should you need to leave one woman for another?"

"Yes. And she was really hurt."

But Anne also commented that maybe, as with her own illness, the separation ended up helping Shenpen. I was certainly struck by Shenpen's quiet confidence and wisdom when we all had a meal together. Then, when I was leaving, Anne having returned to her computer, there was Shenpen walking round her stupa. That was a charming sight to see in North Wales. The layered white Tibetan Buddhist stupa like a giant tall square wedding cake with a bronze spike on top pointing at the sky, with two lines of prayer flags fluttering from strings running to young trees nearby, and Shenpen in her old puffa jacket and long, burgundy nun's skirt, working her prayer beads as she walked round the encircling path.

As her orbit brought her to face me I stopped to say goodbye and we got chatting. I said how pleased I was to see Anne with so much vitality and that I'd invited her to stay with us in the West of Ireland.

"Oh yes, that's what she needs, a good holiday. She needs some fun. Perhaps you can take her bungee jumping or something!" and she smiled.

Shenpen had a wonderful relaxed ordinariness to her. Everything was down to earth. But there was real wisdom there, too. When I commented on how so many Westerners are self-critical, she replied, "Yes, they can be so hard on themselves. In the East they have the idea of punya. Even if they've done something

wrong, well, now they have to do something good to make up for it. But here they don't believe doing good is doing them any good, so it doesn't. They just end up in a collapsed heap of self-loathing. It's very hard to get them out of it."

She was such a bright and happy woman. When I mentioned Anne draining herself with so much giving, Shenpen laughed. "Yes, us women, we just give and give and give. It's just so enjoyable, I can't stop it. Then I'm exhausted. Then I get some more energy and I give and give and give, and enjoy it, and then I'm exhausted again. Men just don't get it. They say, 'Why don't you just stop?', but we can't stop, it's so nice to give." And she laughed again. "Before I read 'Women are From Venus and Men are From Mars', I used to think I was different and had a problem. But now I realise I'm like every other woman and we're all different." With that, she bade me farewell and returned to circling her stupa as I pulled clear on a trajectory to my car. I was pleased that Anne had found herself such a good and appropriate teacher.

Spiritual teachers: do we select them or are they given to us? For me, it seemed a fluke when I ended up on the first retreat Ajahn Sumedho taught for lay people in 1978. But now looking back, I'm not so sure. Ajahn Sumedho, like Shenpen Hookham, had a lightness to his humour: he was not trying to impress or entertain but was simply amused at the world. Most of us were young and serious and he made fun of us: challenging us to leap up out of bed in the morning as soon as we woke and "roar like a lion", but to do it before we heard the morning bell and before we'd looked at the time. We were sleeping in dormitories. So when I did wake at what I thought was the right time, I couldn't do it – in case I was wrong. Then when I looked at my clock and found it was just five minutes before the morning bell, I was so annoyed. Each morning, Ajahn Sumedho would ask with a smile, "Did anyone roar like a lion? " No one ever had.

All I can say personally is that I realised this teacher had what I wanted. He seemingly understood my mind and what I was dealing with, and as Anne described for Shenpen, he spoke with confidence of the state of freedom, which he referred to as the

'unconditioned'. It was something I had intuited was possible, had glimpsed through meditation, but he obviously already knew it well. For Anne it was Shenpen's description of the experience of sunyata as an open heart and heart-felt freedom. Each, though, is simply a different aspect of the same thing, the aspect that means most to that teacher. The unconditioned, emptiness, the open heart, the deathless, nirvana: they are simply different faces of the same Holy Mountain.

From there, I passed over the mountains, on winding roads, where the hedge banks and old trees were replaced with grey stone walls, and villages were strung along valleys. The road signs were all in Welsh, here in its heartland. I was on my way to visit Alison and Michael, the Tai Chi teachers who'd been on Ajahn Sumedho's pilgrimage. They still lived in York.

After a night spent with a friend in the Ruthin valley I continued in the early morning. The mist-filled foothills slowly petered out as I entered England. It was late November, there was a low winter sun in a clear sky and, beyond the border, the oak trees of these lower lands were still covered in curled, brown leaves waiting for the first winter storms to shake them loose. This countryside was dotted with villages and the occasional small town, the spires of their churches standing out in the distance. These were replaced with old mill chimneys when I reached the Pennine valleys, and climbed to cross the rolling winter moors, bleak and brown, to the wide Vale of York beyond, where the old farm buildings were made of brick baked from the valley's clay and the ploughed fields showed deep brown earth.

In York I found Alison and Michael's house, a 1950s semi-detached, on a curving quiet road where each house hid behind a hedge. It was a Sunday and Alison and Michael were making use of the good weather to work on their vegetable bed in the back garden. They came to the door with earthed hands but stopped to clean up and offer me tea and cake. Michael was confident and forthright while Alison was solicitous; both were grey-haired and

in their mid-sixties. They told me they were slowly retiring. We sat round their kitchen table, I set up the recorder and then we began, with Alison doing most of the talking

"At the time we were teaching Tai Chi locally – no, you were in Devon – I was teaching and Andrew was in the class and I said, 'Have you got any spaces left?' We'd been to Nepal before and were keen on mountains. Andrew had decided they needed a couple of extra people. So although we had no past connection to the monasteries, or Ajahn Sumedho, we joined up. That was July 1998. I've looked up the letters before you came, and we went in October.

"There were a couple of meetings of the group, and we had to get fit. We tried out our tents, too – we had to take our own. I never could quite understand that. It was Andrew wanting to keep our ecological footprint to the minimum. Take our own gear and carry it ourselves."

Michael explained how he went to see Andrew on Alison's behalf to sort out a few things like that.

"Yes, I'm so glad we resolved that," Alison added. "I'd been trekking in Nepal and I was clear my back couldn't have coped with a heavy load."

"So were you the oldest, beside Ajahn Sumedho?"

"Yes. We would have been in our early fifties. Anne was the youngest, and David was pretty young. Ajahn Sumedho was over sixty though. We were worried about that."

"So were his monks!" I explained how they'd called me from Amaravati concerned he'd give himself a heart attack. Ajahn Sumedho claimed he was fit from working out on his rowing machine, but they were sceptical. So I'd suggested testing him with a day-long walk on the South Downs. After that, he agreed he did need training. That's how I came to take Ajahn Sumedho climbing in Ireland that summer and then a month later for another week high in the Alps just before the pilgrimage party left for Nepal.

I sat with Alison and Michael round their kitchen table for over an hour with Alison giving most of the answers to my questions,

but Michael occasionally joining in, and when they couldn't remember the details, he'd look it up in his diary and read out sections. I asked if I could use excerpts in this book, which he said he'd think about. I could certainly have the use of his photos, he told me; it would be good to finally see them used. He got a large box out at one point and said he would sort through them later. It was all very pleasant.

Later, after a break so they could get their garden work finished and I could go for a walk to think about what else I'd like to ask, Michael decided he didn't want his words used in this book. So I continued the interview just with Alison, but with Michael still correcting her when he thought she had got something wrong.

After a lunch together, I gathered my things together to start the long journey home and Alison gave me the photos she'd taken with her small camera. She also showed me to the door, explaining, "I think Michael's still not over that trip."

Driving home I was sad at the outcome, but I have respected what Michael wanted and used nothing he told me about the actual pilgrimage. The photos of their pilgrimage are taken by Alison, Anne and David. David's photos were given to me by Anne, who said he would be happy with them being used. I've tried to contact David several times, in the United States where he now lives, but I've never received a reply.

There was also one other member of that pilgrimage party, who Andrew had forgotten: Nick Hodge. It was a surprise to see a seventh person in the photos I'd been given. When I phoned to ask, Andrew explained he was an old friend from Findhorn who'd been on several other treks – an ex-naval officer, who was a little younger than Alison and Michael. "I invited him because he had great people skills. Nice guy and very easy to be with. Which proved very helpful it turned out. He died a few years ago."

As I drove home my thoughts came round to Ajahn Sumedho and how they'd all said how wonderful he'd been to travel with, despite all the difficulties. I recalled that training week climbing the mountains of Connemara. The boggy slopes made the going really difficult, the intermittent rain would come at us sideways.

He was sixty-one and not in great shape, despite the rowing machine, but there were no complaints, only expressions of appreciation. He praised the food I'd carried for our midday meal: "Only you, Nick, could serve a gourmet meal on the top of a mountain," or the wonder of the view, the wildlife or whatever. Then when we were finally down again and sitting in the car, he turned to Mich, my partner, at the wheel and said, "Aren't cars lovely."

There were just the three of us staying in a friend's cottage, and Mich was not Buddhist or inclined to religion. But Ajahn Sumedho made the unusual situation so easy. There was no standing on monastic procedure, or on his position as such a senior monk, which would have certainly put Mich off. Instead, he fitted his rules as easily as he could around the situation. Rather than us formally offering all the food for breakfast, he suggested we just tell him it was offered so we could share the table together. Then afterwards he would do the washing up. It was the same out walking and climbing, a lot of that time also in Mich's company. She felt totally at ease with him.

So much for the seven members of Ajahn Sumedho's piligrimage, but what of the party I would go to Mount Kailash with? I'd tried to keep to my intention of just inviting whoever was at the end of Alex's walk, but happened to visit Stephen and Martine Batchelor in France. Stephen was a Tibetan monk in the 1970s and '80s, spoke the language well, even translating for the Dalai Lama back then, and wrote the first visitor's guide to Tibet, soon after it was opened by the Chinese to foreign travel. So, of course, I sought his advice on a Kailash pilgrimage. To my surprise, he'd never been to Mount Kailash, or even to Western Tibet.

"But how did you write that part of The Tibet Guide?" I asked. "It's all there, I've looked."

"Someone else wrote that for me."

"Well, would you like to come?"

"Perhaps… I should…", he said rather hesitantly. "It's the year I'm sixty and I've decided to take it off to do spiritual things."

Stephen's an intellectual: the most walking he might usually do is an hour's stroll in the local countryside and then only in pleasant weather. But, I realised how helpful it would be to have him along, speaking Tibetan and knowing so much about the culture. It might also be just the right challenge for his year set aside for personal practice, and not just the physical aspect of the trip. Stephen is a sceptic, known for his books questioning the irrational aspect of Buddhism: Buddhism Without Beliefs, Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist. His teaching is based on the same perspective; it's the way he approaches most things in life. I enjoy it: it's healthy to question everything. That's how we see through these ossified teachings to the truth they are trying to express. But it, too, is just another perspective and what better way to challenge that than the most powerful and famous pilgrimage of faith in the Buddhist world.

I tried to encourage him. He said he didn't like the idea of walking in from Nepal. Could we not just drive to Mount Kailash in land cruisers? – others had driven in from Kashgar in the far west of China, visiting the ancient Western Kingdoms of Tibet on the way, which he'd long wanted to see. So I suggested we could see the Western Kingdoms, but still walk in from Nepal – and then we could drive out, after the actual pilgrimage round the mountain. He asked if we could drive in and walk out, so that it would be downhill. I told him how walking in would prepare us for altitude, so that the Mount Kailash pilgrimage would be easier.

We discussed all this several times during that visit, each time discreetly. I never asked, but I suspected Stephen thought Martine might not approve. By the time I left we'd agreed he would seriously think about joining us, and the two of us would go off for a week's mountain walking in the spring, a month before Tibet – with the same training I provided Ajahn Sumedho. After all, the two of us would be the oldies this time.

So I'd already invited Stephen by the time of Alex's walk down the west coast of Ireland that summer. The walk finished with a

boat ride out to the Skelligs, the famous monastic islands that sit out in the Atlantic. Others had joined Alex at different points, particularly for the last section: an easy day across Valentia Island from the ferry landing in the east to the high cliffs which face west, out to sea. I'd resolved to invite whoever was there then – looking out from the cliffs to the Skellig Islands in the distance.

A young Buddhist monk, Ven. Appamado from Portugal, had been with Alex from the start of his walk. Then I'd joined them through County Kerry along with Padraig, a thoughtful man who'd been practising Buddhism for many years, and Rory, a student of my partner Mich, who undertook his doctorate on the obscure moss and liverwort mats that grow near the summit of the westernmost mountains in Ireland and Scotland. He loved mountains and had offered to guide Alex's party over those of Kerry where he lived.

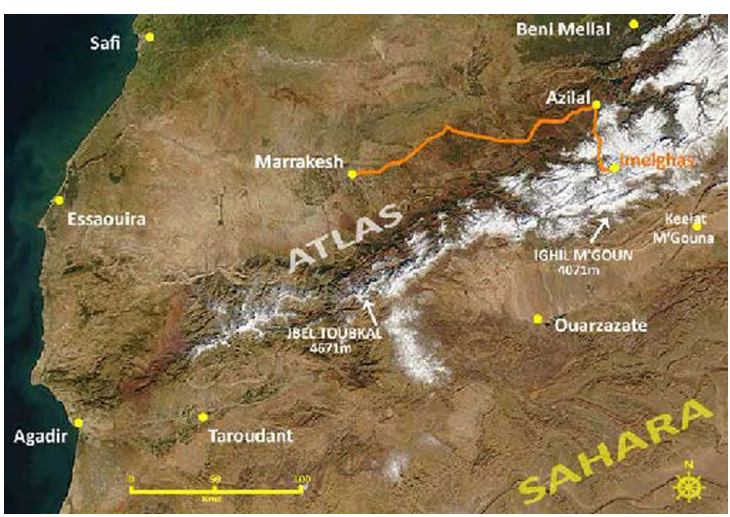
Of course my invitation didn't work out how I'd expected. Alex, of all people, was not at the actual cliffs – he turned off just before with an old friend who had to drive home that night – and two young women keen on walking failed to arrive that day. So, looking out to the Skelligs with me were just Padraig, Rory, Appamado, and Mich. We sat there for a long time enjoying the great expanse of ocean, with the occasional seabird flying past below and the two islands so far out that even from the height of the cliffs they still seemed close to the horizon: two small dark triangles, their sides so steep that it seemed unbelievable anyone could have lived on them.

When it came time to leave I told them about the Mount Kailash pilgrimage and how they were all welcome to come, if they wanted to. There was silence for a while and then Rory said in his quiet way, nearly as a mumble, that he'd always wanted to see the Himalayas. Padraig was more hesitant but thought he might well come, Mich was doubtful, and for Appamado, there was absolutely no question. He told us he'd wanted to go to Mount Kailash ever since he'd heard of Ajahn Sumedho's pilgrimage. Then as we walked back down from the cliffs, he added:

"Nick, it's amazing you just invited me. For most nights on this walk I've been dreaming of going to Mount Kailash! Each night I was walking the kora round the Holy Mountain!" I now understood why he'd looked so stunned when I made the invitation, and why he'd been the last to speak.

Appamado also had a request. "Can you invite Ajahn Amaro? He's been working so hard since he became abbot of Amaravati. I know he took a vow to initially go nowhere for the monastery's sake, but next year that's finished. My heart would be so happy if he could have this."

"Well, that's a good suggestion. I think he knows Stephen. Not well, but they respect each other." Ajahn Amaro, unlike more conservative monastics who can be annoyed by what they see as Stephen's irreverence, appreciated his questioning of conventional Buddhism. However, for himself he tends to the opposite approach – working with the entire scriptures, even the descriptions of devas, the Buddhist angels which live in heavenly realms, or the Jatakas, the Buddha's past lives, which many simply dismiss as fictional stories. Ajahn Amaro looks for teaching in it all. "Yes, a very good idea. It would be interesting to have the two of them there – with such different perspectives." And I could also invite Ajahn Amaro to join our mountain training walk as he, too, was nearing his sixties.



2Delight in the Dhamma

"He suggests not-arising instead of ceasing…" Ajahn Amaro spoke in short clipped sentences between heavy breathing, as they climbed the rocky track together ahead of us "…in his book on Dependent Origination."

"Erm, interesting," replied Stephen, stopping to take this in, along with some even deeper breaths, as he leant heavily on his walking stick.

Ajahn also stopped, leant on his stick and turned to him, "Yes, and so he translates the third noble truth simply as non-arising."

"Arh, very good," said Stephen, too tired to offer anything more.

They'd been talking like this since we started out an hour earlier, as they had done for much of each day on this training journey, usually walking well ahead of us, side by side, deep in conversation, their light, metal walking poles tapping an accompanying staccato rhythm. Only occasionally would Mich and I catch up and so hear a brief excerpt. We instead were both taken with Morocco's Atlas Mountains, stopping often to examine plants or rocks, or to use our binoculars to watch passing birds. Today, however, having started with this long climb, the track zig-zagging up the steep valley side, we were all getting tired, particularly Stephen.

The next time we caught up with them he was collapsed beside a turn of the track. We weren't much better ourselves so we plumped down beside him.

Mich asked, "What's wrong?"

"I'm really pooped. Too much theology."

"But what about the non-arising?"

"Well, there's the non-arising of the energy to climb."

Meanwhile, our young guide was standing at the next turn above, patiently waiting for us, by now getting used to our slow progress. His estimates of how many hours we'd take had proved very optimistic: on the first day he'd had to hurry us up to reach the night's stop before dark.

Ajahn Amaro and Stephen were also enjoying the landscape, occasionally stopping to admire a sweeping view of the dry foothills rolling away to the south or the snow-covered mountain ridges above us. Ajahn would then take photos either of a scene or of the unusual colouring of so much of the exposed geology – light-purple cliff faces or mottled dark-green sheets of rock. With features like this, Stephen would also get his camera out, but to film it. Much of the time though – that is, when they were not too tired – they were engrossed in conversation.

They were about the same height; Ajahn dressed in his ochre robes and a wide-brimmed sun hat dyed the same colour, Stephen in a light-green jacket and black beret. They were also about the same age, both grey-haired. Being old friends of mine, I was quietly enjoying their enjoyment of each other. I was also fascinated by the snippets from their discussions on Buddhist teachings, sometimes even managing to join in myself. That wasn't the case for Mich. "Would they not shut up?" she had murmured beside me the day before, as we all stood together above a cliff with wonderful views back up the valley we'd been walking through. Our track had risen out of the vibrant green world of the irrigated valley floor onto the arid semi-desert slopes, and the contrast was now spectacular.

After some fifteen minutes I suggested we might move on, at which Ajahn Amaro replied, "But we're looking at the view." Their conversation stopped then and Mich had ten minutes not being distracted by an accompanying discussion on Buddhist ethics. When we did move, I deliberately allowed them to walk ahead again and Mich, relieved, commented, "They weren't looking at the view!"

For myself, I was torn. Ajahn Amaro and Stephen are both known for the depth of their understanding of the Buddhist scriptures and their conversations seemed profound to me. My few contributions seemed like some country yokel trying to make a point at a sophisticated urban dinner party. I couldn't even manage the language – one of them usually needing to correct at least one expression I used.

However, I'd resolved that this walk was not for my benefit. Yes, I needed to become fitter for our Himalayan pilgrimage the following month and to acclimatise both to altitude and heat, but Mich was not coming to Mount Kailash so she deserved to enjoy this trip, and my other two companions had both left behind a lot of responsibility.

In Marrakesh, I'd booked accommodation in the old town. The taxi from the airport dropped Ajahn Amaro, Mich and me where the narrow streets began, and from there we followed a porter wheeling our bags ahead in a cart, down winding stone-flagged alleys, hemmed in by shops, houses and small hotels, the sky a narrow slit above. Eventually we reached an arched doorway made of stone with a large solid-wood door studded with square iron nails. According to the guidebook recommendation, this was once the house of someone important, recently converted as an annexe to a hotel we'd passed, and it was one of the tallest buildings in the old town, with good views from a roof-top garden.

A hotel employee showed us up to that roof terrace where he served us mint tea, confirming that Stephen had arrived earlier. From there we looked out over a thousand assorted roofs: clay-tiled or with corrugated tin; some with battlements or small towers; others flat with gardens or even tents, but each with their obligatory white satellite dish. Beyond them, the ancient, crenellated town walls had brightly dressed tourists walking along them, while the tops of leaning date palms designated a famous palace garden. Here and there, clacking storks nested atop

abandoned towers, crumbling sections of the town wall or electricity poles. A slight haze, left from the day's dusty heat, hung over it all, but rising out of the haze in the far distance, and crystal clear, were the Atlas Mountains covered in snow.

Stephen had been out to explore the old town. He joined us on his return, expressing appreciative comments about his room, which was beside a small, tiled pool in an inner courtyard. He told us this was the first real holiday he'd taken since he returned to Europe to start teaching and writing more than twenty years before.

After more mint tea, Stephen guided us back through the warren of streets and across the town square to the souk, where we joined the bustling crowds squeezing between colourful stalls selling carpets, pottery, shoes, fruit, jackets or some other commodity. Immediately inside the market's entrance every stall was aimed at tourists, with owners frantically beckoning us in, but as we penetrated the narrow streets further, we came to stalls frequented by locals where the owners were more relaxed. There we bought supplies for our journey ahead: nuts, dried fruit, whole cheeses, big slabs of chocolate, and slices of nougat and sesame cake cut from trays – things we thought unlikely to be available in the mountains.

Returning across the square the call to prayer started from a nearby mosque, followed by other muezzins competing for the faithful. Meanwhile the crowds were now coalescing into groups of spectators, each encircling a different performance: dancers, jugglers, card trick men. On the far side, we stopped at a cafe beside a small mosque where men queued to wash at two large, white porcelain sinks on an outside wall, before going in to pray.

Stephen sat outside the cafe, his ankles crossed, sipping at a coffee, wearing his black French beret, and taking in the square's activity, while commenting on the pleasantness of it all. I've a lot of respect both for the amount of teaching Stephen does around the world, just for donations, and for his scholarship. It's a lonely and brave path he's taken, enquiring into our inheritance from the Eastern Buddhist traditions to tease out what the Buddha might

have actually taught. So I really hoped he was also going to come with us to Mount Kailash. He told us that perhaps he could fly to Lhasa to join us for the actual circumambulation of the mountain. I thought that wouldn't work logistically, but it was a start. Maybe if the rest of this trip went as well as this….

That evening we three lay people ate in a nearby restaurant. It was Stephen's idea and although I incline to eating my main meal around midday, I was trying to forsake my wishes. And Mich, of course, had no problem. So we accompanied him to a restaurant billed outside as the best in Marrakesh. Stephen likes his sensual pleasures and enjoys poking fun at what he perceives as my Theravadan prudery, and here he had the perfect setting. The restaurant was literally palatial, having been a royal residence; our table was in an enclosed tiled courtyard set back amidst intricate latticed stone work and looking out on a fountain playing in a pool with scented plants climbing the wall beyond. The many waiters (more than there were diners) wore silk sashes over black evening dress. And off the courtyard was the most fabulous room: sky-blue tiled with exquisite Islamic non-pictorial designs. Stephen insisted we had to order a good bottle of wine. That's something else he pokes fun at me about – my reluctance to drink alcohol. His Zen Buddhist tradition has no problem with drinking, and although he doesn't indulge in it, he does enjoy good wine. Mich, being half French, had no problem with this either.

It was a lovely evening; a perfect end to our first day. Towards the finish, Stephen admitted that today was his sixtieth birthday, the start of the year he'd taken off for himself. That was why he'd wanted to have such a nice meal. Mich and I were so pleased, we clapped.

Next morning, we set off for the Atlas Mountains in a grande taxi. These are large, battered old Mercedes which ply the long-distance routes to other towns: ours so soft on its springs that it sighed over every bump. Usually they are filled to the brim with locals but the guidebook said we should hire one for ourselves.

After half an hour's haggling we set off to Azalil, which was halfway to our destination: the less frequented and distant M'goun region, where the Atlas Mountains are just as high as those nearer Marrakesh, but less steep. I'd planned a trek that started easily but would eventually take us to the top.

At Azalil, which like Marrakesh is set in the dusty but cultivated Moroccan plain just north of the mountains, we had to procure another grande taxi to take us into the mountain valleys. The bartering for the taxi, as for everything else, had to be done by Stephen or Mich, as I have no French – Morocco was once a French colony – and Ajahn Amaro no money. But by this point Mich was gently excluding Stephen from this task as he had no inclination at all to haggle – whatever someone asked for, he would pay, even though he knew afterwards he'd regret it. When we first met him in Marrakesh he'd complained about the taxi fare from the airport – we found he'd paid far more for one person than we'd paid for three.

It was late afternoon by the time the old taxi wound up the last of the long mountain valleys. We'd passed through several old Berber villages of tall mud houses, and now Imelghas, the village at the trail head, was coming into view. The driver had been speaking earlier on his mobile phone and here we met the result: a local man loitering at the roadside waiting to join us. Once in the car, he proved to speak English and, having made friends, he then offered to organise both where we stayed that night and to help us plan our trek. He seemed nice enough so we decided to trust him.

His first advice was about the snow. There'd been a big fall over the last few days – that's why the peaks had looked so impressive from Marrakesh – and as a result most of the passes were closed. The route we'd planned, starting with a gentle few days, was impossible. The only pass that was sure to be open was the one directly above us, a climb straight up of well over one thousand metres. He suggested we spend the next day walking in the valley while he found out more, and sought a guide, supplies and mules for us.

So the next day we wandered up a side valley past small fields of

verdant young wheat or little orchards of apple and pear trees coming into flower, following small canals running with water and lined by towering walnut trees. Everywhere birds sang a frantic spring chorus amidst the greenery. In contrast, the dry valley sides only supported low grey scrub, while further up there were dark-green evergreens, beyond which the high mountain ridges were blanketed in white.

Occasionally a Berber in traditional clothes passed us, trotting on a mule or sauntering along usually with a mattock over one shoulder. Most of the men wore long, brown, woollen garments with hoods, which Stephen thought "rather nice house coats". The women were in multi-coloured dresses with scarves draped lightly over their heads.

At one village, guided by a band of children, we found a wide sheet of rock imprinted with dinosaur footsteps, along with a battered interpretation board. Later, we stopped to eat our lunch on a grass bank beside a tinkling canal, serenaded by cicadas and the midday call to prayer, after which Stephen snoozed on his back under the shade of a small stand of white poplars. From there we climbed steeply up the spur dividing our side valley and the main one, on a slope dotted with stunted and twisted ancient cedars and sprawling juniper bushes. That wasn't so easy: it took a sweaty hour, toiling steeply uphill before we emerged onto a ridge top covered in arid grassland, more rocky soil than plants, but with an arcing pale blue sky above and magnificent views out across the two valleys, either side.

A herd of goats grazed in the distance with a shepherd leaning on a long stick. Making towards him we came upon a newly bull-dozed track which then descended the steep slopes of the main valley by contouring along them, and Ajahn Amaro and Stephen could stroll ahead again, side by side, in conversation. They had by then got to discussing Ajahn Amaro's relative, I. B. Horner, who first translated many of the Buddhist Theravadan texts, starting nearly a century before. They were now both referring to her using her family nickname, 'Bobby'. When I caught them up Stephen commented to me how surprisingly pleasant all this was

and I took the opportunity to tell him the trek through the Himalayan valleys to Mount Kailash should be much the same – we would have our gear carried on mules as we would here, once we were under way.

Back at the house our 'friend' was waiting. He'd found a young guide (the younger ones being cheaper, he explained), two mules and muleteers. He also had our food and confirmation that we had no alternative to the steep climb next day as all other passes were closed, something Mich was dreading. His solution was an extra mule, just to the top, on which she could opt to ride for part of the climb. Mich was reluctant, but when Stephen pointed out that he, too, could make use of the mule, she gave in.

We met our guide, Mohamed, next morning. He was dressed in Western clothes, with a small day pack slung on one shoulder, but sporting one Berber accessory: a large thin scarf, which was wrapped round his neck when we first met him, but later worn either as an enormous twisted turban or wrapped loosely over his head for shade and flowing down his back. It was bright pink with a flowery design, and very feminine. Mich suggested he'd borrowed it from his wife for the walk, but if so, then other men we later met in the mountains had each done the same.

Our muleteers turned out to be our friend's brother-in-law who we already knew well – it was his house we'd been staying in and he'd served our meals – plus his young nephew. And the mules were not their own but were to be borrowed from a neighbour. Our muleteers were so excited by the prospect that I suspected neither would normally have done such a trip. As our supplies were still piled in the yard and there was no sign of the mules, we started before them so we could climb in the cool of the morning, collecting another man leading our extra mule.

We climbed all that morning on a rough mule track winding up through twisted cedars and junipers, the view behind us gradually opening out so we could catch glimpses of all the foothills on this side of the mountain and of the distant hazy plain. Kites turned on thermals above us and mountain choughs drifted past, giving their long high-pitched cry. The day before over a hundred choughs had

circled above us – ragged black birds with blood-red beaks and feet. About halfway up, the muleteers passed us, riding their mules on top of the supplies – I wondered if they would have done that if the beasts were their own. By then it was getting hot and we were starting to tire. Mich had already reckoned the extra mule a great success even before she gave in and mounted, as the sight of the long climb above was no longer daunting. Once she'd mounted, swaying ahead of us, it was noticeable how only she regained the enthusiasm to comment on everything around her. Her only complaint: she couldn't get close enough to the plants she was now noticing to identify them.

By now we were above the tree line, and small, mat-forming alpine plants had started to appear, some with delicate pink flowers. The snow on the pass ahead was much closer, but still we climbed upwards. Ajahn Amaro usually climbs like a small truck, putting himself in low gear and then ascending steadily with no need to stop, so that his companions have to suggest taking the breaks. But now the altitude was having an effect on us all, so that even he would come to a forced stop, gasping large breaths for five minutes, before starting up again. I was also struggling and noticed to my surprise that Stephen and Mich, who each had a ride on the mule when they were tired, were much less affected by the altitude when they did climb. I pointed this out to Stephen during a break just before the top and he told me that yes, it was easier than he'd feared and he was enjoying even the challenge of this long climb. "And how was the mule?" I asked.

"The beast was incredibly sure footed, even over narrow places, but I couldn't help feeling rather sad for the poor creature."

We reached the pass after trudging through large patches of deep snow for the last hour and wrapped in most of our warm clothing, but once through the slight notch in the mountain ridge, we found the southern side snow-free and at midday, pleasantly warm. The muleteers awaited us, sheltered behind a crag, and had cooked us lunch using their gas stove. We ate perched on the lip of the mountain ridge, gazing down across the waves of lower hills that disappeared eventually into a haze, where the Sahara Desert

started. To our right, the highest mountains were still completely covered in snow, with Ighil M'goun, a long white whale rising in the middle, awaiting us.

Here on the lee side of the mountains, sheltered from the prevailing westerly winds which bring the little precipitation that the Atlas receives, everything was much drier. There were no trees or scrub on the slopes; from this distance the landscape appeared to be just multicoloured rock and scree in bands of traversing geology. Some of the colours were spectacular: there were light pinks, mauves and dark greens amidst the dominant ochre.

The walking was now easy. Descending gradually as we traversed the slope, we kept the panoramic view for the first hour. And our guide was beginning to realise what an untypical walking group we were. We were passed on the descent by the kind of group he would have been used to, the only other one we were to see on this trip, made so early in the season: some twenty trekkers, plus lots of laden mules and muleteers, all intent on 'getting there'. They sped past us, now that they were over the pass and going downhill and they were soon out of sight. We, meanwhile, strolled along chatting, stopping to take in anything of the slightest interest, Ajahn Amaro and Stephen even stopping sometimes just because their conversation had reached some important point, while myself and Mich regularly wandered off the path to look at unusual plants.

The dry southern slopes of the Atlas Mountains were really fascinating for ecologists like us. Although at first glance everything seemed bare rock and scree, looking closely with Mich, something she's so good at, some of the slight hummocks resolved into plants just coming into both leaf and flower. There were lizards, birds and small mammals, too, all in dull mottled colours so as to be difficult to discern.

At one stop Stephen told us how similar this was to the raw landscape of much of Tibet. It, too, was a mountain desert with strikingly coloured rock formations; in Tibet, too, the few villages occurred beside small rivers running with mountain snow melt that was used for irrigation. The houses also looked similar: mud

and stone walled with flat mud roofs, and the people had the same open friendliness.

He mused that perhaps he really should come with us, that it would be rather nice. He'd questioned whether he should go as he'd turned his back so publicly on Tibetan Buddhism because of all the superstitious beliefs, but he still respected it…. And the act of pilgrimage itself, that was always a good thing…. It would also be good to honour the tradition which first provided the Dhamma for him in his sixtieth year…. And he could help us. The only problem was Martine: she'd like to return to their old monastery in Korea.

With a clatter of hooves, two men appeared over the rise in the track ahead, wearing faded turbans, traditional hooded felt coats with rifles and bandoliers slung over their shoulders, and red ribbons bleached pink on the reins of their tough mountain ponies. As Mich instinctively raised her camera to capture this fabulous sight one of them shouted roughly, "Non, non, non," as the other raised his rifle. Instead we just exchanged curt bonjours as they trotted down the slope past us.

This valley, away from electricity and a proper road, was known for its traditional Berber culture so we'd decided to spend two nights there so we could wander through a few of the hamlets.

At the valley head, there'd been a crumbling kasbah: a towering crenellated fort, made of mud and stone with slit windows, its walls slightly splayed out at their base. Such forts also stood, abandoned, in each of the valleys we'd passed through on our first day's walk. The ochre mud houses with a wide border of whitewash around each window were also the same, but here they were without modern adornments such as satellite dishes. The only part of the houses not from the valley itself were the ornate metal grills in each window; there was no glass behind these, only worn wooden shutters made, like the doors, out of rough planks, presumably poplar as that was the only tree we saw. The children in this valley were also poorer, they all ran barefoot and their cries

of 'bonbon, bonbon' were much more insistent.

At a rest stop Stephen sat down with his back against a large boulder and commented how nice it was to have so little to do, and how unusual that was for him these days, to which Mich added, "But I thought that was what meditation was all about?"

"Meditation has rather become my job," he replied with a slight weariness.

It was at this stop that Ajahn Amaro and Stephen shared how they'd both been sensitive children – so much so, Ajahn Amaro told us, that his family had to prevent him seeing the Bambi movie as he'd be too upset by the traumatic parts. They also found they were both the youngest child of mothers who were unusually sensitive themselves; Stephen was brought up a vegetarian, and Ajahn was surrounded by the many animals his mother liked to care for. I asked if they thought that was why they'd both taken a lot of drugs as teenagers.

"Oh, yes," Stephen replied. "I was so sensitive I was taking drugs by the time I was fifteen to cope with the painfulness of life."

"Me too, and it's why I drank so much alcohol," added Ajahn. And they agreed that their sensitivity had also been part of the attraction of monastic life.

They had a lot in common: both had a liberal, middle-class upbringing; both were sent to good schools by parents who'd hoped they would turn out as doctors or architects or some other professional of use to society. But they'd both become Buddhist monks before they were twenty-two.

"That must have disappointed your parents," I commented.

"Yes, very much," answered Ajahn Amaro. "My father made a condition in his will that I couldn't have my third if I was still a monk. But my parents eventually thawed when they saw me doing something of 'worth'." For Ajahn, that was publishing the book of our walk across England together; for Stephen, there had also been a book and the translating he did for famous monks, including the Dalai Lama, when they came to Europe. He was seen on TV. After that their respective parents were willing to

admit to their friends and neighbours what their sons were.

Walking again, I recalled how I had once, long before, followed behind Ajahn Amaro, then a junior monk, strolling beside Ajahn Sumedho, our teacher, delighting in their enjoyment of each other. That was at the end of a week-long walk in England in the mid-eighties. We'd started in Lancashire's Forest of Bowland, a semi-wild area originally set aside for royal hunting, crossed the limestone pavements of Silverdale, dotted with flowers, and found our way to the Lake District, where we had climbed through the mountains. It rained most days and Ajahn Sumedho struggled with the climbing whilst carrying a heavy pack containing his camping gear, but afterwards he only had praise for the experience. He used it to illustrate talks both on the right attitude to difficulty and to share the wonderful sense of freedom that comes with simple walking.

But the last day had been easy, the weather had cleared, the sky was blue and all we had to do was slowly descend a long high ridge with views as far as the distant coast. Halfway along the ridge I realised we were going to be late again, but I couldn't hurry them this time – they were so obviously relaxed and enjoying themselves, chatting as they walked along. When we turned up two hours late and the woman collecting them, really worried, had contacted the mountain rescue, it was me that got all the blame. But it was worth it.

On this walk Ajahn Amaro was strolling ahead much in the same way, this time beside Stephen. But he was older than Ajahn Sumedho had been then and he was now the venerated elder. Their discussion had moved on to the teaching of one of the early Greek philosophers.

"His teaching," Stephen was saying, "was that one should not conceptualise and thus find a mind without words, and through that, find a mind that did not have trouble, which is much the same as the Buddha taught."

I had a question. "In all this Greek stuff, does anyone give desire as the cause for suffering?"

"No, not that I have read," replied Stephen, "but I feel the

Buddha refers to desire as a cause because he was teaching in India and the Hindu teachings point to desire as the cause of suffering. Thus the Jains do, too. But you don't need to conceptualise it that way."

"Like that Greek chap in his garden, you mentioned earlier?" I suggested. "The one who was going on about enjoyment and that the state of mind was the important thing, not the thing you were enjoying."

"Yes. That 'chap' was Timon and he doesn't mention desire. It's not essential."

We had stayed the previous night in the first village we came to in the valley, where our muleteers had been sent ahead to secure the best rooms in the only guest house. On our return we were told the local villagers reckoned our planned route into the higher mountains was impossible with mules because of the recent snow. I suspected our guide always knew this as neither he nor the muleteers seemed to be carrying anything for a night outside. They said our only choice now was to follow the 'valley of the roses' trail which led down through the foothills to a town on the other side of the mountains from where we could travel back to Marrakesh. We would not get the altitude training I'd hoped for, but perhaps it was for the best. Stephen and Mich would certainly enjoy the easier option. And, after all, this walk was not for me.

"The Gelug-pas came to power in 1662 after the Dalai Lama's war lords beat the Karmapa's war lords," Stephen explained as we sat about the breakfast table two days later. "Now this is important as this is playing out now. Naive Westerners are saying, 'When the Dalai Lama dies, this nice young Karmapa can take over'. That's head in the clouds stuff: to the Tibetans, this is the real issue. The last thing the Gelug-pas will tolerate is the Karmapa having any position because he's the head of the Kagyu-pa. In Dharamsala

today they have restricted his movement. They don't want this Karmapa to go to America, to go abroad, to get any profile at all. They're afraid he'll be perceived as representing all the Tibetans."

It was fascinating listening to Stephen outline Tibetan history. He'd started that morning by explaining how Buddhism was introduced in the seventh century by Songten Gampo, the first ruler to conquer most of the Tibetan plateau, and how the new king had needed this foreign religion to help create a more unified 'Tibetan' nation. It was this king who patronised the great Buddhist saint Padmasambhava – the Tibetan equivalent of Ireland's Saint Patrick – an Indian who roamed the country vanquishing pagan gods and establishing the foundation of the new religion. Songten Gampo's dynasty then reigned for one hundred and fifty years during which Buddhism flourished, until the last king in the dynasty tried to reintroduce the old animist Bon religion and was assassinated, "rather embarrassingly", commented Stephen, "by a Buddhist monk. Tibet then fell apart into local fiefdoms, only some of which were Buddhist."

"Is that when monasticism was suppressed and why the Nyingma developed the householder mode of practice?" asked Ajahn Amaro.

"I think suppressed is the wrong word," replied Stephen. "The monasteries were simply no longer sustainable, though of course the Bon-pas would have targeted monks. But yes, monasticism then needed to be re-introduced. And once it was, three hundred years later, the old Nyingma tradition could only continue to survive in remote parts of Tibet, well away from the new centre of power in Lhasa – like the area around Mount Kailash where you're going."

This conversation took place after breakfast as we sat on a first-floor terrace, looking out over little green fields in a valley where the locals were already at work. There we were being serenaded by nightingales. In the dry hills we'd crossed the day before, all we saw were two eagles, just dots circling on a thermal above a distant cliff, and a few dowdy cousins of birds we knew at home: a wheatear, a couple of stonechats calling and a ring ouzel that

darted off behind some rocks. But once down amidst this greenery, birds were everywhere, particularly the nightingales.

The guide had told us that this day would be a short one, even for us. There would be no climbing as we'd be walking through a gorge. So we'd opted for a long leisurely breakfast and were now on to our second round of coffee. It was the coffee that was fuelling Stephen's lecture.

"After the next introduction the Mongols appeared, around the same time they were threatening Europe. Different Tibetan lamas became teachers of different Mongol khans, and the Karmapa chose the wrong khan. The khan backing the Dalai Lama was Kublai, who was the next big one after Genghis. So the Dalai Lama and the Sakya-pas became the rulers of Tibet sponsored by the political power of the Mongol empire in China. When the empire collapsed in the middle of the fourteenth century, Tibet became an open field again. Then a couple of hundred years later you get the rise of the Gelug-pa school inside the Sakya-pa. That was started by the great scholar, Tsongkhapa, and again we get the same situation: different groups being sponsored by different Mongol khans. It's like the Russians and the Americans in Africa: 'who's your backer?' So this time the Gelug-pas won and so the Karmapa, and the Kaygu-pas, lost for the second time. They must have been really pissed off."

"But these names I keep hearing for Tibetan Buddhist groups like Kaygu-pa, are they schools, or traditions or what?" I asked.

"'Kaygu' really is a fiction created by the pressures on Tibet. It's just an easy term for me to use," Stephen explained. "They never saw themselves as that in Tibet. Kaygu just means oral tradition so there were lots of Kaygus. I discovered that in the eighties when I went to Tibet just after it opened. We'd take a land cruiser and drive a couple of hours and I'd ask the local people what tradition are you and they'd say, 'Oh, we are the Bordon Chuiliwhat.' 'The Bordon Chuiliwhat!?' 'Yes, this valley has always followed the teachings of Bordon Chuillinum. You've not heard of him?' Each little valley system had allegiance to some obscure teacher from the twelfth or thirteenth century. So there were lots of Kaygus.

There was no centralised body like the Gelug-pa, who are the only true 'school'. But when they all came out of Tibet in '59, the rest realised to survive they needed some kind of cohesion. So they said, 'Look, we'll call ourselves Kaygu-pa. And the Karmapa,' who headed just one of the Kaygu groups, 'we'll acknowledge him as the head of our tradition.' And the Nyingma-pa said, 'We all go back to the teachings of Padmasambhava, so we'll work together'. There was no such thing as the Nyingma tradition before, but in exile they said, 'Right, Dudjom Rinpoche, you can be the boss'. Now, what will happen if they get back to Tibet? Well, the whole fiction will just evaporate."

"It's the mountains, isn't it?" I suggested. "Like the way plants divide into separate species because they are isolated in different mountain valleys."

"Exactly! You have to see Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet to understand it, and that's what you'll be doing."

But I still hoped Stephen was going to come with us. The previous evening he sounded like he really might. He'd been talking again about his mother, how innocent she'd been. How she'd married a Scottish car mechanic she met when he fixed her car, and they moved to Dundee where Stephen had been born. She only realised her husband was an alcoholic when one day he was sick and she had to walk the dog. Instead of heading for the park, the dog trotted straight to the pub and stood outside. Stephen mentioned it was her hundredth birthday and Ajahn Amaro said that this year would also have been his father's hundredth, if he had lived, and that he was planning to leave his father's watch on the side of Mount Kailash as a way of thanking him. So I suggested, rather romantically, that perhaps Stephen could do something similar for his mother. His reply had a cautious double negative that seemed a good omen, "That would not be a bad idea."

That evening we'd been taken to see the turreted fortress, far larger than previous kasbahs, that dominated the village. Gates opened onto a cobbled inner courtyard overlooked by slit windows, with a great wooden entrance door that had a slot above

it for pouring burning oil on any enemy. The well was hidden inside the building, where stone stairs twisted upwards past doors and corridors that led to rooms that were, until recently, still lived in by the family of the man showing us around – now they had drying crops spread on their floors. From the battlements we watched the sunset, a dusty red haze arching across the sky.

Next morning, after that breakfast, we passed beneath the fortress's outer walls as we left the village. Just beyond it, several men were building a new house, two of them packing wetted mud with a wood thumper into a wooden form atop a half-built wall, while another brought more earth from a nearby excavated hole. Elsewhere in the village, older buildings, all with the distinctive splayed walls like the fortress, were crumbling and returning to the earth.

Our track led down and across the valley, the river now just two rivulets meandering across a wide shingle bed. We crossed each by means of a few stepping stones – the agricultural canals we'd been passing further up the valley had syphoned off the rest. A worn path followed the river bed, sometimes crossing the shingle but mostly running beside narrow fields that backed onto cliffs. These cliffs were low at first but grew higher and came closer as we went on. Eventually there was only us, the small meandering river and giant oleander bushes between two towering limestone walls.

We had to regularly splash across the river and traverse heaped stones and sand. In the gorge it was cool and, as we hadn't far to go that day, our progression became even more fitful. Ajahn Amaro stopped to ponder photographs he would take of the gorge, or of rock formations, or of the small flowers which Mich was finding as she scoured the lower cliff faces – and Stephen was leaning over the small river to film the light reflected on moving water or examining the debris hanging from the flowering oleander bushes. He makes collages with scraps found on his journeys. From amongst the bits of clothing and plastic adorning the shrubs he tore off several worn pieces of cloth that he then exhibited to us. I did try pointing out others I thought similar in an attempt to help, but he was very particular – all my suggestions

were gently dismissed in the same way he would correct mistakes in what I said about Buddhist theory. That day it was my use of the expression 'the Truth'.

"Now what do you mean by that?" he asked. "The Buddha never used expressions with a capital letter. No absolutes. He expressed everything in relation to something else. So not 'Freedom', but 'freedom from suffering'. And never 'the Truth'" As usual, I had to admit he was right.

Eventually we came upon our muleteers, sitting with their backs against the piled luggage; with our lunch prepared some time before. They were gently snoozing as they waited, while their two mules grazed happily nearby on fresh green grass, instead of the hay which was their usual midday fare. They'd stopped where the gorge had started to open out; the first small canal, overhung by delicate maidenhair ferns, was taking water away for a few narrow fields further down stream and a flock of sheep and goats were being directed across the now less steep lower slopes by two young girls in faded flowered dresses.

Stephen had taken to looking out for Ajahn Amaro during the meals, making sure he was formally offered each of the dishes, which was rather sweet – particularly as he's written several times questioning the appropriateness of Buddhist monasticism in the West. That afternoon as we went on, we found thick hedges of roses, just coming into pink flower, between fields of young wheat. The descent in altitude also brought wild fig trees and occasional stands of giant reed. These were more than ten feet high and each sheltered several calling reed warblers. We also spotted the first palm tree, growing amidst houses along with the ubiquitous white poplars. But here the poplars had leaves fully out, fluttering in the slight breeze. As the afternoon went on, and we descended further, more of the roses were in flower, until eventually I could take a photo of Mich standing amongst hedges covered in pink. Soon these pink petals would be harvested and taken down the valley to Keelat M'gouna, our destination, to be soaked in vast pans of water, so creating rose water which is then boiled down to produce rose oil.

Mid-afternoon, we came upon a village where women were doing their daily wash in the river, the drying clothes draped over oleander bushes. The combination of the brighter coloured garments scattered amidst the regular faded debris on the bushes gave Stephen a flashback to his misspent youth.

"It reminds me of the film 'Zabriskie Point'. The fridge scene where everything exploded: chickens, fruit, bottles of pickles disintegrating and filmed from about eight camera angles; this incredible long slow-motion scene. Do you remember that?"

"Yes," Ajahn Amaro replied. "A very good scene if you were in a chemically assisted state."

"I was in a chemically assisted state and it was really amazing."

We stayed that night in a cheap hotel in a small town. A map painted on the foyer's wall gave a bird's-eye view of the Atlas Mountains, with green strips in the valley bottoms, little villages with their names and lots of ochre with jagged mauve ridges and peaks. The guide pointed out our route, all the way from Imelghas. He also showed how next morning we had a choice: we could walk beside the river to Keelat, or take a taxi ride there. Mich and I opted for the former, while Stephen and Ajahn Amaro preferred the latter. Stephen said he felt he'd done the walk now and fancied a morning doing nothing except sitting in a café over coffee and maybe visiting the rose water factory, while Ajahn Amaro was concerned to get there in time for his meal. But we all got up early to see off our muleteers, who we'd grown very fond of. We gave each a generous tip after praising them for their help, cooking and patience. The guide explained that by setting off at dawn they hoped to get home in a single very long day, trotting all the way on their un-laden mules.

Mich and I were joined by the guide even though we insisted he could go in the taxi. With his duty nearly discharged he was more relaxed and wanted to know the names of the flora and fauna for future walks. Mich stopped to give French and English names to the birds and plants we spotted, which the guide then repeated to himself as we walked beside the now much larger river. We had to cross it on a log pole bridge, and balance just as carefully under a

cliff on the concrete wall of a canal. We eventually arrived to find our two companions waiting outside the best restaurant. They'd tried to visit the rose water factory, but it wasn't working yet, so instead they'd spent the morning sipping coffee while watching the activity on the main street.

There we had a celebratory meal before paying the young guide, who was off on an overnight bus to Marrakesh. We spent the night in wonderfully named Ouarzazate, Morocco's gateway to the Sahara Desert. The next day we took a final grande taxi over the mountains. During this long drive I took the opportunity to ask Stephen how he became disillusioned with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

"It started with a meditation retreat taught by Goenka."

"The one on which we first met?"

"No, another a few months before that – June '73, I think – and held in the Tibetan Library in Dharamsala. I think the Dalai Lama had invited Goenka to teach it. There were lots of young Tibetan monks and any of us Westerners who wanted to attend. That retreat made me question a lot of things the Tibetans had been telling us, such as you can't really meditate until you have done so many prostrations and donkey's years of preliminary studies to gain merit and all that stuff. Instead here was this simple mindfulness practice which was really effective.

"Then after the retreat Alan Wallace and I wanted to track down the sutta which Mr Goenka had been teaching from. This was in the context of the Tibetans' claim that they, and they alone, had the complete canon with everything the Buddha taught: Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana. But we found they'd never translated this important sutta. For me, that was the first rupture in my faith. But, despite that, I stuck with it because I had great admiration for my main teacher. I was also a little turned off by Goenka because he also proposed unfounded spurious explanations and insisted you had to just do his technique."

"Yeah", I interjected, "I remember your comment after the retreat we did together. When I asked what you thought of his warning that changing meditation practices was like trying to dig

a well for water and then starting over in different places each time, you said as far as you were concerned, you now had a shovel to go with your pick and spade."

"Yes, but those two retreats did make me start to question what I'd been taught. The Gelug-pa school say again and again: don't believe everything but question it. However, of course, we understood 'question everything' in a Socratic sense, i.e.: check it out to see if it's true, but the Tibetans don't understand it that way, at all. They say check it out until you arrive at the right orthodox view. If you check it out and come up with a different view that means you haven't checked it out enough."

"So all that formal one-on-one debating with the hand-slapping which I see the young Tibetan monks doing," I asked, "is that because the Tibetan teachings have developed as a set of arguments against other traditions, and students are expected to learn all the arguments to support their school's view?"

"Exactly."

"I attended one of your lectures at the Tibetan Library. Sue Lunn-Rockliffe was travelling with me for the summer and she was studying theology at Cambridge. She dismissed it all as the way they once taught Christianity."

"Yes, pre Enlightenment. Trying to prove what you've already decided to believe. Once we moved to Switzerland with Geshe Rabten I started studying Western philosophy, theology and psychology, I did a Jungian analysis degree, which helped put Buddhist philosophy into perspective. Then it became less and less possible for me to accept what I was being taught: that the study of Buddhism in Tibet in the fourteenth century was the last word on all things religious and philosophical. It's an absurd position to take – fine if you are a Tibetan cut off from the rest of the world, but now they're in the West! So I found I couldn't in good faith continue in training as a monk and a teacher. You see, Geshe Rabten had asked me to teach lay groups and I felt really uncomfortable doing that. I had a lot of love and respect for him, but it felt hypocritical."

"So that's when you left?"

"Yes, both Alan and I deserted him for much the same reason: we couldn't, or didn't, want to do all that teaching instead of our own practice. Alan left first, then I asked Geshe's permission to go to Korea to try Chan practice."

"What was his response?"

"Why did I want to go when this was the teaching proved wrong in the eighth century debate between Kamalasila and Hva Shan! But he did agree that I should find out for myself. He was an incredibly open man. He'd had no problem with us trying the Goenka retreat – he said he really respected the Theravada tradition for their Vinaya – or with me doing the Jungian analysis. I told him I was only going for a year, but I found the simple Chan practice, with those long silent winter retreats, so enjoyable. I did come back when I heard he was ill with cancer, but by then I'd decided the Tibetan tradition wasn't for me."

Stephen stayed in that Korean monastery as a Chan monk for some four years, until the teacher died. Since then he's been a layman writing and teaching with Martine, who he met when she was a Chan nun in the same monastery. His writings with their careful questioning of assumed beliefs in Buddhism annoy some Western Buddhists, particularly those in his old Tibetan tradition, but to me it seems he's doing us all a great service. His scholarship opens out the possibilities of what the Buddha might actually have taught, so that we can try to work it out for ourselves – which to my mind is what the Buddha was encouraging us to do. Maybe sometimes Stephen takes his arguments too far, and seems to dismiss essential teachings, but so what, he doesn't want anyone to believe him either.

Gentle scepticism seems to be Stephen's way of being so that there are things he knows through meditation which he finds difficult to acknowledge. In the Atlas Mountains, as well as being very negative about the superstition in Buddhism, he pointed out how the idea of parami, earning merit, which occurs throughout Buddhism, arose later and wasn't in scriptures. "The Buddha never taught it: he just taught causality." But then I asked him about the concept of grace. Didn't he feel blessed? Was there not a lot of

fortune in his life? Even a sense of miracle in how it all came to be? He said it was true, there was a lot of fortune and that he couldn't help but be attracted to the notion that somehow the world came to meet us halfway if we made effort on the spiritual journey. And this was not understandable; he could not explain how it worked. Stephen does not mention that in his books. The Buddha did not describe it either – at least explicitly – but he did say repeatedly that there were things he knew that he did not teach.

It was in Ouarzazate that Stephen finally gave us his decision about Mount Kailash. We were sitting outside a café on the edge of the paved town square, the low evening sun bathing a line of tourist shops in a golden glow, and watching the better-off town folk promenade across the square, with several boys zooming about astride electric cars supervised by their fathers, while their demure head-scarfed sisters looked on. The walking was done and it felt as if we could sit there contented for ever. Stephen told us he'd really enjoyed the walk over the Atlas Mountains. It had, in fact, been a revelation: how good it felt to be doing something so simple amidst nature so that the physical difficulties felt irrelevant. Both his mind and his body now felt so much better for it. He slept well, an intermittent digestion problem he suffered with had disappeared, and his mind was clear and peaceful. It was something he'd determined to bring regularly into his life in future, but while Mount Kailash might do the same for him, he felt having had this trip for himself was enough for now, and he should think of Martine.

By then it also felt the right decision to me, too. Both for Martine, and also because our Moroccan journey had gone so well it might be best to leave it at that. What Stephen had told us would help in understanding Tibet. But I also had a premonition that Mount Kailash might prove more difficult than I expected. You will discover that both proved very true.

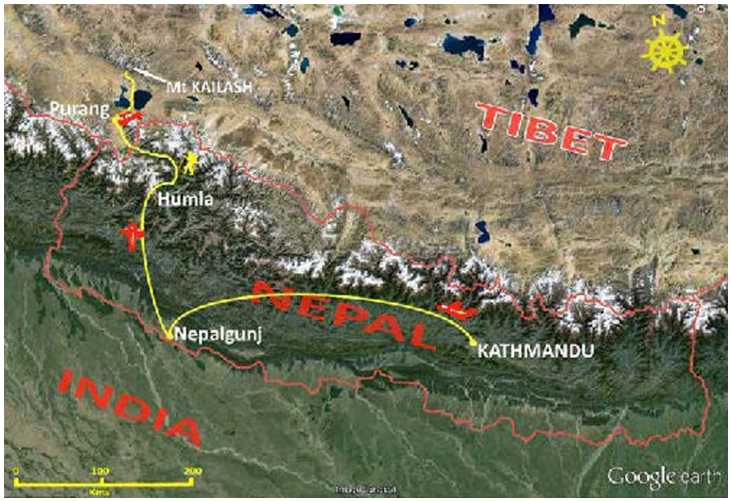
I received one last correction from Stephen that evening, when I summed up this sense of the correct decision with the comment that his participation didn't seem 'meant to be'.

"Now, that's a Totnes take on the world," he rebuked me. "'Not

meant to be.'" Totnes is the centre of the alternative hippy culture in the UK. He must have got a lot of that when living there.

And Ajahn Amaro added, "Yes, I have a campaign against that in the monastery."

I would miss Stephen on the pilgrimage, rebukes and all. It's good to spend time with someone with such a discerning mind.



3 Honouring One's Lineage

Ajahn Sumedho's pilgrimage to Mount Kailash started in Kathmandu, where they were met at the airport by Gerd Ledermann, an old friend and ex-husband of the eminent German Buddhist nun, Ayya Khema. Anne Dew told me Gerd drove them to Kopan Monastery in his jeep. "We were all laughing as many of us had been to Asia before and it was that slight craziness about everything and this thing we were travelling on they called a road."

"Why Kopan?" I asked.

"That was David's Tibetan Buddhist tradition: the Gelug-pa. We were met by the acting abbot, Lama Yeshe something or other, an amazing guy, really cheerful and so compassionate about the Chinese, despite everything they've done to the Tibetans. I found that so inspirational. And he took such good care of us – really made a fuss of Ajahn Sumedho."

"Did you stay long?"

"No. Because of that missed flight at Heathrow and arriving two days late, we had to pack everything in. There was a trip down to Kathmandu to shop and then to see our tour company and the Sherpa team. That's when we got the next bombshell. The happy mood changed then. Two weeks previously the Chinese added a rule that no monks could enter Tibet because of the riots in Lhasa. Not even Sherpas with the surname Lama. One of our Sherpas, called Gelpu Lama, could only walk with us to the border, the tour company told us. So that brought us up short: what do we do now? The visas for the monks weren't complete. The tour company said no shaven heads or monk's robes!"

"So what did you do?'

"Well, we decided to do the trek anyway and just see what happened when we got to the border."

Andrew Yeats told me that it wasn't how the monks looked which was the real problem – that could be covered up at the border with a hat and coat – it was their passport photos. The tour company told him to bribe the Chinese border guards to let them in, but Andrew kept that quiet, as he thought Ajahn Sumedho might not approve.

True to my aspiration to follow in Ajahn Sumedho's footsteps, we also started our pilgrimage at Kathmandu, but although Andrew had suggested we should also stay at Kopan Monastery, we decided to honour our own lineage by staying with Nepal's small Theravadan community.

The last time I was in Kathmandu, I'd come with Ajahn Sucitto at the end of our epic pilgrimage on foot round the Buddhist holy places of the Ganges plain. Exhausted, we had summoned one final effort from our dilapidated bodies, wasted by five months of dysentery and an inadequate alms-food diet. Somehow we'd struggled up and over the Himalayan foothills, both of us at times close to collapsing with the effort, to be welcomed into this ancient valley of the Newari people by those who had in recent years adopted Theravada Buddhism. They did us proud: they fed us, cared for us, and made an enormous fuss of us while also celebrating what we had achieved.

It was the Newari people who created the famous Mahayana Buddhist temples and the giant stupas with two watching eyes that have become the iconic logos for Nepal. Since those times, most Newaris have turned to Hinduism as a result of their conquest from outside the valley, but the priestly caste, descended from the original monks and still living traditionally in the old monastic viharas, stayed Buddhist – they were the ones with the most to lose. They became the society's goldsmiths and artisans and then later the shopkeepers – a wealthy community but one that felt

embattled both by the Hindu majority and the recent flood of Tibetan Buddhists pouring over the Himalayan border, who established monasteries full of real monks and nuns, like Kopan. So some of them turned to Theravada to revitalise their Buddhism. Last century they headed south or east to go forth as monks or nuns and then, in ones and twos, to return to found a smattering of modern Theravadan viharas, usually housing a solitary monk trained in Burma or Sri Lanka, maybe with a few associated nuns or a couple of novices.

Of these, it was Venerable Jnanapurnika who impressed us most on that visit. He practised and taught meditation, the deportment of his five young novices met Ajahn Sucitto's exacting standards, and there was a Buddhist nun, named Chini (sugar) dressed in confection-pink Burmese nun's robes, who'd been to Amaravati Monastery. We stayed with him in the vihara he'd recently established on the small road leading to the airport – a modern town house by the river, overhung by trees; quiet, clean and conducive to practice. So I'd written to ask: could we stay there again this time? I knew it would be too small for the whole group but if Ajahn Amaro and myself were to arrive a few days early, Ajahn could meet the Newari Theravada community, then it could become the base for the monks with the rest of us staying elsewhere.

We were met at the airport by one of those five novices, now named Ven. Nigrodha, a robust and enthusiastic man in his early thirties dressed in the monastic dark-plum maroon of the Burmese Theravada tradition. As we emerged from the crowds – so much more than I recalled from that last visit – he greeted us with a torrent of enthusiastic English: it was so good we had come, Ajahn Amaro was such a respected monk, everyone still remembered the visit of Doctor Nick with Ajahn Sucitto, they had received the copies of our pilgrimage books, their vihara had been in the book, other people on our pilgrimage would also be staying. It was all too much to take in, particularly as standing beside him and smiling broadly was a young woman I'd taught in Ireland named Clair, who was trying quietly to explain her presence. "I phoned

them when I got to Kathmandu, I just wanted to know how I could visit you, but he insisted I came to stay."

The quiet road I recalled from the airport had also changed. It was now a two-lane highway, full to choking with belching lorries, tin buses honking for passengers, flocks of motor scooters and the occasional intimidated small car like ours. It was lined by high modern buildings adorned with enormous advertising hoardings set amidst tottering electricity poles, tufts of ruderal vegetation and lots of rubbish. In the distance, where I remembered gentle paddy fields and toiling peasants, was an ugly urban expanse.

I'd forgotten the Buddha's instruction to recall how everything in this world is subject to change – despite having been surprised the previous time I came to Kathmandu by all the development. On this next visit I was not surprised: I was horrified. Like all developing countries, Nepal has struggled to deal with the migration of the rural population to the cities. In Nepal's case, this is made particularly tragic as it is one of the poorest countries in the world with one of the highest densities of population, but with only one city – Kathmandu, which was once one of the most magical places on the planet.

The little vihara had also mutated. A large sign announced 'The International Peace Pagoda' and it was now a three-storey affair built of carved red bricks with an internal courtyard set before a white tiled temple at its rear. The small house, its pleasant garden and even the overhanging trees, had all gone, only its name remained: everyone still called the new temple ' Viswa Shanti Vihar'. At least it no longer faced the highway; we turned down a dirt road on the river bank to reach the front entrance. But the river was not a river anymore either – more like an open sewer, dark rivulets of water moving between rubbish, the stench of which Ven. Nigrodha apologised for as we got out. "When the rains come the smell will stop." But that was still three months away. Presumably it would get worse before then.

Waiting at the vihara's tall metal gates was a large gaggle of shaven-headed young boys, most dressed in the scanty robes of novice monks, bits of cloth, coloured maroon, yellow, ochre or

something in between, over their brown skin. We were taken, with them in noisy attendance, to the main temple to meet Ven. Jnanapurnika. At least he was much the same, if much older and yet larger, but still courteous, deliberate and caring. He told us he was about to leave for a conference in Thailand, but we were to make full use of his temple while he was away. Rooms had been prepared for all our party – the rest would also be collected from the airport.

Ajahn Amaro greeted him by kneeling to bow three times, the proper sign of respect for a senior monk. Now as an afterthought, he was asked how many years he'd been a monk and it was their turn for a surprise. Thirty-five years. Nigrodha and two other monks were immediately directed to bow to him, along with all the novices, and there was a sudden rearrangement of our accommodation: Ajahn Amaro would have the room reserved for visiting senior monks.

The following day we visited Kopan Monastery where Ajahn Sumedho had stayed, as part of an outing Nigrodha arranged to the great stupa at Boudnath. The stupa was as I remembered, the vast white dome set above a series of steps with its head, the square base to the golden spire, looking down at us benignly with those knowing golden eyes. Nigrodha had the driver take photos: him with Ajahn Amaro on the steps, him with me and Clair, him showing us the stupa as we walked around it. The encircling houses were more modern than I recalled, but still on a similar scale. Now, though, they were shops selling tourist and religious ware, or cafés. But it was the road we arrived on that had really changed – it was now a city thoroughfare, choked with traffic and lined with tall buildings which obscured any prior sight of the stupa. Once out of the car, I was left standing there stunned. On my very first visit, forty years previously, I'd stayed at Boudnath and cycled to Kathmandu on a country lane, without a single vehicle to concern me.

At Kopan Monastery the effect was the same. As the others went off to visit the monastic buildings where young Tibetan monks and Western students were passing between classes, I was

rooted next to the car, gazing out in amazement from the hill at the sea of houses stretching all the way back to where I knew Boudnath stupa must be. Even twenty years previously it had still been paddy fields, which Ajahn Sucitto and I had walked across. Then I remembered, with a twinge of embarrassment, a talk on Buddhism and Ecology given on that last visit to Kathmandu, and a question afterwards: what could be done about the degradation of the Kathmandu valley, the uncontrolled development, the pollution of the rivers, the loss of forests on the slopes? I'd tried to be optimistic, as I still tried to be then, telling them how they could work together to stop it happening. I was now looking at how wrong I'd been.

Anne Dew with her teacher, Shenpen Hookam, in North Wales.

Ajahn Amaro with Stephen Batchelor in Morocco.

Meeting in Kathmandu: Chris, Nick, Roger, Ven. Appamado, Ajahn Amaro, our guide Indra, Sange Lama, another Tibetan monk and Ven. Dhammarakkho.

Flying out of Nepalganj: Ajahn Sumedho, Ven. Sugato, Andrew, Alison, Anne and Nick Hodge

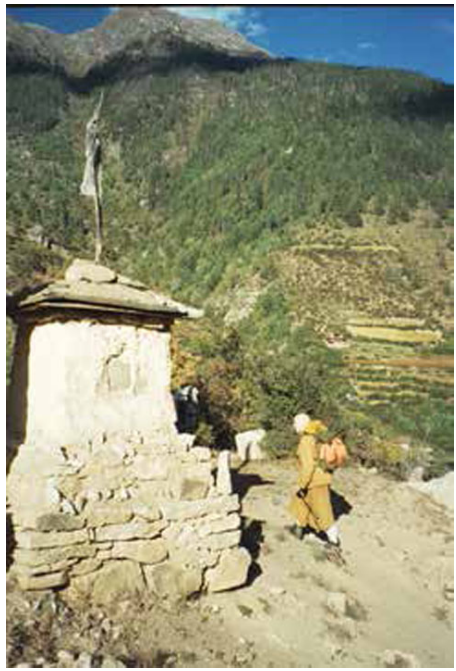
Ven. Dhammarakkho steaming out of Simikot on the trek's first day.

Andrew leading Ajahn Sumedho and his party on their first day trekking.

Ajahn Sumedho, Anne, Andrew and David with Thakuri children in Humla.

Tea stop on our trek through Humla.

Our party on the day before arriving at Yalbang monastery.



Ajahn Sumedho passing a Buddhist chorten just before Yalbang Monastery.

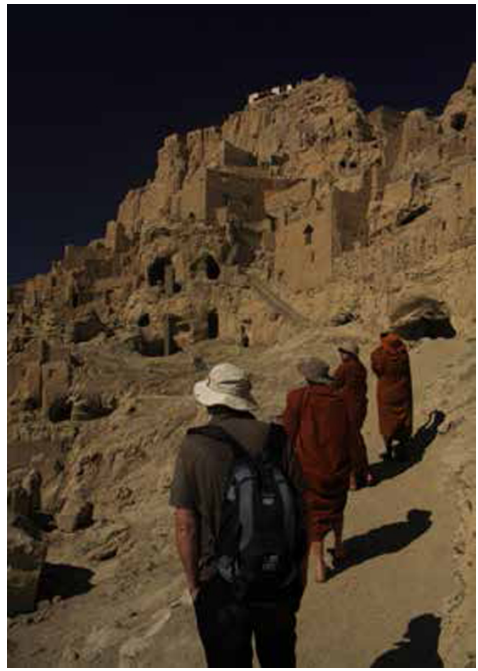
Ajahn Amaro and Pema Riksal Rinpoche discussing Dhamma in his house.

Pema Riksal Rinpoche at the head of his Tibetan monks on the final day of Saka Dawa at Yalbang monastery.

Our party back on the trail to Tibet.

Andrew leading Ajahn Sumedho and his party over the Nara La pass.

Bowing to our first Buddhist shrine in Tibet, at Tirthapuri.



"We beheld the lofty castles of the ancient city of Tsaparang, which seemed to be carved out of the solid rock…." (Lama Govinda. Way of the White Clouds).

"Hrrmmm. Very good." The depth of Sange Lama's tone showed how impressed he was.

Ajahn Amaro had just mentioned his first encounter with Buddhism, when he was nineteen, with Sange Lama's Tibetan Nyingma lineage. When Ajahn added he'd also met a famous Nyingma monk when that monk came to America in 2001, the response was even stronger and deeper in tone.

"Hrrrmmm. Very good. He is teacher for my brother."

"Yes, several of us went from our monastery to pay our respects. We spent the day with him."

"Hrrmmm! Hrrmmm!"

We were meeting because Ajahn Sumedho had stayed at a second Tibetan monastery, this time unplanned, on their walk from Simikot to the border. I hoped we could also stay there, so

Stephen had put us in touch with Sange Lama. When I called him in Kathmandu he wanted to come straight round.

"My brother is very happy to have students of Ajahn Sumedho as guests at his monastery. He has much admiration for him. You must come for Saka Dawa. This is very auspicious. And next day is a rest day when my brother can see you. This will be very good."

Everything, it seemed, was auspicious, particularly Ajahn Amaro's connection to the Nyingma tradition. After Sange Lama left, promising to return in a few days once he'd contacted his brother again, I asked Ajahn Amaro about that first encounter with Buddhism.

"It was in London. There were thirty or forty of us squashed into this tiny flat on Oxford Street, no, Gilbert Street, where Dudjom Rinpoche was giving this tantric empowerment. It was all so way over the top. He had this incredible CV: Sariputra (the Buddha's principal disciple) in a past life; accomplished Tibetan mathematician; astrologer and healer; great Dhamma master. And there was this huge build-up during the weekend, it was hyperbolic. And I was pretty high anyway: in each of the breaks we'd been round to a friend's flat to smoke another joint so we could make the most of it all. They explained how incredibly auspicious it was going to be to see this terma, revealed from the naga realm and full of tantric teachings. Then we were shuffling forward. Finally my turn came and Dudjom Rinpoche opened the small door and I was expecting this wonderful exquisite object and it was just a handful of mud squished into a wonky human form with two little beady eyes. I thought, 'is that it!?'"

"And this monk was…"

"Dudjom Rinpoche wasn't a monk; he was there with his wife and children. He was the head of the Nyingma-pa."

"The guy who Stephen explained was made the head when the Tibetan monks fled Tibet?"

"Yes. He was a great scholar, really well respected. But at the time I just thought, 'Well, that was interesting for a weekend,' and left it at that. These days, when I say to Western Nyingma followers, 'Frankly I didn't get any huge electronic buzz or

transformative life experience; in fact, I felt disappointed,' they say, 'Ah, that's just the surface levels. Actually that's why you're a monk. Within a couple of years of that empowerment, you were in robes!'"

This was the kind of nonsensical belief that Stephen's scepticism had gagged on when he'd been a Tibetan monk. But, what can you say, except it just depends on your perspective.

For our other visitor that day, it was meeting Ajahn Amaro which seemed hugely auspicious. Jharana Bajracharya is a Nepalese film actress who has stayed at Amaravati Monastery where Ajahn Amaro was the abbot. She attended a retreat taught by him; inspired, she had then stayed for the winter and even considered becoming a nun. So for her to now meet him in her home city was immense. Meanwhile, for Nigrodha, it was the visit by a Bollywood movie star that excited him. Before she arrived he couldn't stop telling me how famous she was: how she'd won Miss Nepal and been in the Miss World competition; the movies she'd been in, like 'Love in Nepal'; all the adverts she'd made. She was Nepal's most famous star. And she was a Newari Buddhist! We had to persuade her to support their temple.

Nigrodha waited at the front gate for a good half hour before Jharana arrived. He escorted her up to Ajahn Amaro's room, a dozen novices trailing in their wake, and once he'd shown her inside and shooed them away, he settled, uninvited and looking expectant, to one side. I could see Ajahn was slightly perturbed by this, but he made no comment. Jharana seemed unfazed, however. She was just delighted to see Ajahn and to talk about her meditation practice. That was her real love, first learnt on a ten-day retreat when she was fifteen; only later did she mention her career, and then in a dismissive way said that she didn't know if she wanted to continue with that, the Bombay film industry was such an unpleasant thing. Rather she'd like to teach meditation, her fame meant people were now interested – what did Ajahn think, could she do that?

Before she left, Jharana offered to take us somewhere; she could hire a car. Was there anywhere Ajahn would like to go? There was:

he would like to visit a monastery, the base for a Tibetan teacher he'd known in America. He knew his friend was away teaching in Germany at present, but he'd still like to visit the monastery which was somewhere in the valley. Nigrodha immediately offered to help and took over the arrangements for a trip the next day.

Ajahn Amaro had met Tsoknyi Rinpoche when he was first sent by Ajahn Sumedho to California. Someone phoned to say a visiting young Tibetan meditation teacher would like to meet him. They'd immediately got on well, attended each other's teachings and then a few years later taught a long retreat together exploring the similarities in their approach to practice. Tsoknyi Rinpoche is a master of Dzogchen, which cuts away the complexity of the usual Tibetan practises to return the emphasis to simple awareness, as the Forest Tradition has done within Thai Buddhism. Dzogchen is a speciality of the Nyingma-pa.

For our trip to the monastery, Nigrodha had arranged a four-wheel drive with enough room for Ajahn, me, Clair and Nigrodha, as well as Jharana at the wheel. He told us the monastery was on top of a hill on the other side of town. As we crossed congested Kathmandu he couldn't resist pointing out the large billboard with Jharana's face smiling down at us. The modern suburbs eventually thinned to a scattering of new houses amidst paddy fields; a lime green one was where Jharana lived with her parents. They'd built a new home here a few years back, she told us, seeking to get away from the smog and noise of the city.

We had to climb two different small hills to find our monastery. A tarmacked switchback road led up the first one – to the monastery of the wrong rinpoche: Trulshik Rinpoche, the teacher for Sange Lama's brother, who Ajahn had also met in California. He'd died a few years previously, which I guessed was why the place was now so quiet. When Ajahn explained he'd paid his respects in California, there was another deep Tibetan 'Hrrmmm' of approval, and we were escorted to a large shrine adorned with pictures of their venerated teacher and given booklets about him and his teachings. Then we were taken to the far side of the hill from where the monk pointed to another hill topped with another

scarlet and yellow Tibetan monastery in the distance. This was Tsoknyi Rinpoche's monastery. The hill looked the same, the names sounded the same. No wonder our mistake.

Tibetans, being mountain people, chose to site many of their new monasteries on the previously unused hill tops in the Kathmandu valley. When we finally arrived at the right monastery, a young monk explained that everyone had gone down, on this their rest day, to Boudnath. We should come back tomorrow when there would be someone senior to receive us. But then, as we turned to leave, there was a sudden cry: "Ajahn Amaro, what are you doing here?" And a short scrawny monk without his outer robe came bounding across a lawn with a broad smile on his face. His English was excellent and spoken with an American drawl.

"Wow. I was upstairs. We're only just back. I've been with Rinpoche's mother in the mountains. Then I had this sudden sense I was needed down here. Not like I heard anything but like I just felt I had to come down. Then, there you were! That's really amazing."

Ajahn introduced Tashi-la, secretary and attendant to Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Tashi-la insisted we all follow him back into the main temple and upstairs to the teacher's private apartment where we were introduced to the mother, a lady in her sixties wearing a traditional Tibetan dark dress with colourful pinafore who spoke no English. Over tea there were explanations: our pilgrimage, Tsoknyi Rinpoche's teachings in Germany, their trip to the family home near Mount Everest. Then Ajahn Amaro asked the mother, through Tashi-la, about her sons. There are four brothers, Ajahn explained to us, and all are recognised as reincarnate lamas, or tulkus, and thus referred to with the honorific 'Rinpoche'. Their father was a much-revered Dzogchen master who established this monastery. But the only son the mother wanted to talk about was her youngest. She missed him and was worried about him, she told us.

Tashi-la explained that Mingyur Rinpoche was the one the family now looked to, to continue the father's work. "He's the real thing. Even as a young boy he was into meditation, going off alone

to sit in caves. He completed the traditional three-year retreat as a teenager, and he's always just wanted to be a monk." The family had decided he should take over responsibility for the monastery from his brother, Ajahn's friend. But then Mingyur had disappeared, escaping through his bedroom window in the middle of the night, taking only the clothes he wore. He'd left a letter to his disciples (which can be found online), explaining he wanted to practise as a poor wandering hermit but would one day come back. That was two years previously and the family hadn't heard of him until just the other month when his mother had received a letter reassuring her he was well. A Korean Buddhist nun had recognised him living as a hermit in China on the borders of Tibet. He'd given her the letter, swearing her to tell no one who he was and to not post it for two weeks to give him time to disappear again. "Yeah, we met the nun, but there was no trace of him by then," Tashi-la explained. "She told us how good he was at lighting campfires and stuff like that. That really knocked everyone out." But the mother didn't look impressed, just worried. Maybe they were reincarnate lamas but to her they were just 'her boys'.

Later, as Tashi-la showed us round the rest of the monastery, I could see why Mingyur might have wanted to flee. We were shown into an enormous building under construction, Tashi-la telling us, "This is the new teaching hall where Mingyur Rinpoche will instruct the monks and visitors one day." Fleeing family life and its responsibilities to undertake the spiritual journey is an ancient tradition. The Buddha fled just like that – in the middle of the night, with nothing. But, it seemed ironic that the family business being fled in this case was spiritual teaching.

Tashi-la also took us to meet the grandfather, up yet more stairs to a single room that sat atop everything else – Tibetan temples are often constructed like tiered wedding cakes. The room was lined with Tibetan religious artefacts: hanging thangka paintings, piled chanting scripts, a brass bell, and a shrine which was side by side with a television. On a raised bed on the opposite wall and facing both TV and shrine, sat an old man dressed in maroon, hung with mala beads, his scanty, long, grey hair tied behind his

head. Tashi-la explained that the grandfather, the father of the mother I think, was in his nineties and a great spiritual adept. When Tashi-la told him in Tibetan who we were and about our pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, his reply in Tibetan was assertive.

"He asks why you're taking so long, that it only takes three days at most to walk round Mount Kailash." Ajahn Amaro explained how we would also walk to the mountain on the traditional route over the Himalayas, and when the grandfather asked why, added, "So we can use the adversities we encounter, physical difficulties, any problems with our companions, whatever, for our practice. Hardship like this is good for spiritual practice." When Tashi-la translated this, there was an approving "Hrrmmm" followed by a few words in a milder tone. "He says, 'Yes, that's the right way'. He was just checking you were doing it for the right reason."

Then Ajahn asked, "Is there any advice he can give us for the pilgrimage?" The translated question received a very emphatic response in Tibetan.

"He says, 'Take a good stick.'"

"We both have walking sticks," replied Ajahn, but this wasn't enough for the old man, who grunted another emphatic statement.

"He says it must be a very good stick!"

At the vihara we ate our meals, breakfast and lunch, in a room above the main dining area, served by three young nuns in pink: Sisters Subha, Kheema and Sudhamma. When Ajahn Amaro was invited to dine there, at a table with Ven. Jnanapurnika, I assumed I was to eat with the other monks and novices downstairs, but a pink nun came to fetch me. They'd set Sister Chini's table for me. Once the two senior monks had taken what they wanted, the food dishes were borne to my table. The nuns called me 'Venerable Doctor Nick' and told me that Sister Chini, who was away visiting, had instructed them to take good care of me.

Next day with Ven. Jnanapurnika gone to Thailand, Nigrodha was promoted upstairs in his stead. He enjoyed his new

importance, telling the nuns what to do, although there was no need. But he could also be very helpful. Ajahn Amaro had only to mention something and Nigrodha would have his smartphone out organising it. In the vihara I'd usually find him busy in the office: maybe looking something up on the computer, or deep in a discussion with a visiting layman. Within a day of our arrival he'd booked both of us to give talks for their new degree course, the first year of a new Buddhist University, they were running at the monastery. The vihara also housed a school for the young novices, the All Nepal Bhikkhu Association, and was responsible for the nearby International Buddhist Meditation Centre. Nigrodha seemed to be running most of it.

The vihara was a great base for us, but I struggled with the nights. At first I put this down to jetlag, but as it carried on all I could do was accept that most of the night I was awake, some of it wide awake sitting or walking in meditation on the flat roof. It could be very pleasant walking back and forth in the moonlight, the city at rest, with just the occasional lorry or car passing on the main road below. But by dawn I was always drained, only then managing an hour's sleep, usually just as the morning puja in the temple started, a discordant high-pitched babble of young voices chanting. Thankfully, there seemed to be no expectation I should be there.

After four days, the first of our companion pilgrims arrived: Ven. Dhammarakkho, who I still thought of as the Colin I'd known since the early days of Ajahn Sumedho's teaching. A few years previously, when his daughter was happily married, he'd finally fulfilled his wish to go forth: he had become a luang dah, or venerable uncle, the name the Thais have for men who become monks at the end of their lives. It's a term of endearment but one also indicating they should be given some latitude. Colin's quirk was tudong: he was inspired to go wandering, living as an alms mendicant, whenever he could: setting off on great rambles across Britain with robes and bowl slung over one shoulder. So he'd jumped at the chance to join the pilgrimage when invited by Ajahn Amaro to be his monastic companion. This was instead of

Ven. Appamado, the young Portuguese monk I'd invited at the end of Alex's walk in Ireland.

The Chinese, you see, had changed the rules again on who was allowed into Tibet: our party, minimum of six, now had to have passports from the same country. It was all part of China's continuing attempt to exclude individual travellers who were more likely to be sympathetic to the plight of the Tibetans. So Padraig, with an Irish passport, also had to drop out.

The next day Dhammarakkho came with us to the Swayambhunath stupa, the more famous and ancient of the two large Buddhist stupas in Kathmandu. Unlike Boudnath, it is set atop a hill. There Jharana would meet us, buy us a meal, and she'd also offered to pay for a taxi. But Nigrodha had arranged for a supporter with a four-wheel drive to take us. That, he assured me, would be much more comfortable. It also meant Nigrodha was now coming, too. At breakfast I could see Ajahn was not impressed with this. "This is an invitation from Jharana to us."

"Yes, yes," Nigrodha replied. "She is happy for me to come also."

"Well, please ensure we get there in plenty of time. We'd like to climb up to the stupa."

"But there are a lot of steps. It's a long way up. The driver will take us to the top." I suspected that Nigrodha, who was rather plump, never undertook such exercise.

"We want to climb the steps. We need to get fit for our walk," Ajahn replied very firmly.

"You could go down afterwards…"

But Ajahn was insistent. Then when the four-wheel drive arrived and proved to be no larger than a taxi, he was again insistent: there wasn't enough room to take three monks as well as Clair and myself, and no, he wouldn't squeeze into the front with the driver and Nigrodha. Nigrodha would have to stay behind. Undaunted, Nigrodha telephoned another layman who promptly arrived with his car.

The resulting convoy did then deliver us to the bottom of the hill, from where, starting between two large Buddha sentinels, the

flights of steps ascended steeply, dotted with tourists and Nepalese pilgrims climbing to the distant top. It was a warm, sunny day and what with the altitude of the Kathmandu valley, it was not just Nigrodha who was puffing and red in the face as we climbed, while monkeys peered down from the trees on our labours, their tails dangling behind them.

At the top, Jharana was waiting for us amidst the crowded terrace at the stupa's base. The giant stupa, with its knowing eyes gazing out on the world below, was surrounded by temples, large and small, shuffling pilgrims circumambulating it, smaller monuments and gawping tourists. We joined the throng, passing large copper prayer wheels, smaller stone stupas, Buddhas, and tourists, all under a multitude of prayer flags flapping from lines tied above our heads.

Nigrodha then took us to see the Theravada vihara on the far side of the hill where he arranged fruit juices to be served; Ajahn was reluctant but was assured there was time enough before their meal. On the way back I realised I'd left my hat behind so I arrived late at the restaurant to find that Jharana, wanting to ensure her teacher got only the best, had ordered an elaborate Nepalese meal. In my sleepless state, I didn't notice the time; I just sat gazing out of the window at circling kites as Jaharana spoke with Ajahn Amaro. Nothing could be done when Ajahn pointed out that the meal would arrive too late. Sure enough, despite entreaties to the kitchen from Jharana, the first dishes were put on the table only five minutes before midday.

Nigrodha quickly assured Jharana that there was now no problem – as long as they started eating before midday, that was within their rules. But the look of resignation on Dhammarakkho's face told another story: Ajahn Amaro comes from a much stricter tradition than that. After a few mouthfuls of rice, while watching his clock, Ajahn Amaro stopped as its hands arrived at midday. Dhammarakkho followed him in putting his utensils down and only then did Nigrodha realise, with a look of utter dismay, that he, too, had no choice but to follow the lead of the senior monk. Arrayed before them were a dozen delicious

Nepalese curries.

Of course Jharana was upset, but Ajahn gave a teaching on the suffering that arises when we don't get what we want, be it a meal or the joy of giving a meal. He also asked Clair and me to eat what we could to honour Jharana's gift while they sat next door. They then departed, with Nigrodha trailing reluctantly behind, still looking back at the curries.

Afterwards Clair and I walked across Kathmandu to save Nigrodha phoning again for an extra car. We headed east, wandering from new suburbs to old, then into the narrow streets of the traditional commercial district, eventually to emerge into Durbar Square. This had been where the magic came from, or so it seemed to me, when I was first in Kathmandu as a twenty-year-old. Then, I was amazed by the random collection of ancient wooden buildings with tiered pagoda roofs, carved latticed windows and leaning walls, ornate statues on very tall pedestals and gods to be peered at through little doors. The locals went about their business, oblivious, while I wandered around in awe.

Durbar Square is now a World Heritage Site, full of tourists with guide books explaining how this building was a royal palace or that a temple to such and such a god, with a rope across the road and a Nepali official in a booth charging for entrance. So instead we joined the local youth sitting outside the barrier on the tiered flight of steps leading up to a lesser temple. From there we watched the tourists pass back and forth below us, with locals still going about their business oblivious. From there I could also point out where the 'pie shop' used to be, where we, then around the same age as Clair, would spend our time playing chess, smoking very strong hashish bought from the official government booths, and eating slices of sweet lemon meringue pie.

It had been a thoroughly enjoyable day.

The next of our pilgrim companions to arrive was Rory Hodd.

He was born in England, his parents later moving to southwest Ireland because of his father's love of nature. Rory, the youngest of four sons, was the one to inherit that love. Being rather shy, he found botany particularly appealing. As a young boy he walked Killarney's mountains with his father in search of rare plants so that by the time he arrived as a student in Mich's class at Galway University, he was already a good field botanist. Mich likes to tell a story of a residential field trip when the other students, amazed, spent an evening trying and failing to find a plant that Rory could not, quietly, identify. He was joining us from Sikkim where he'd been walking in mountains famous for their flora.

The other layman, Chris Smith, arrived later the same day. I'd been walking with him in the Tatra mountains so when I found him sitting in the cloisters on the day I visited Amaravati to invite Ajahn Amaro, I'd asked him if he'd also like to join us. It was Gobi, a supporter at Amaravati, who then found the money to pay for the monks' airfares when I mentioned how the laymen I'd now invited would struggle just to find the money for themselves. "Nick, it's no problem; everyone will want to help when they hear Ajahn Amaro is at last doing something for himself. And Ven. Appamado is such a selfless young monk, everyone likes him."

I never quite gave up hope with Appamado, even though he was later replaced by Dhammarakko. It was those dreams he'd been having about going on pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. Despite both Ajahn Amaro and Stephen being so adamant in Morocco on the need to dismiss such notions, I still had this strong sense that it was 'meant to be'. Then, when I returned from Morocco, the Chinese had changed the rules yet again and now he could come. So I sent an e-mail to everyone I knew asking if they'd like to help a young Portuguese Buddhist monk go on pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. I got over fifty offers, which amounted to just enough to pay for his airfare. So we booked him to arrive with Chris. It was good he came, as the last layman I'd invited was told by doctors only a week before that he couldn't fly. We wouldn't have had six and couldn't have gone into Tibet.

But having three Buddhist monks on a Buddhist pilgrimage,

although auspicious, had its practical considerations. Most of their costs, including the local flights to Simikot and all their needs in Tibet, were to be borne by us laymen. My only income was the rent from my cottage in Northumberland, Rory just worked summers recording mountain plants and Chris was making his living as a storyteller working with schools. Usually, trips with monks, particularly those with famous Buddhist teachers, are stocked with wealthy benefactors and undertaken in luxury. This one would be at the other end of the spectrum.

"Such that there is neither name nor gender, just mere curiosity, just mere awareness. Then you walk on and you come to where Indian groups unfortunately arrive in coaches. This will be like a market situation: lots of yaks and horses and people screaming around, trucks bringing their tents and luggage. Do not engage into this. Stay in your kora. This miserable thing is nothing to do with Kailash. Next you come to the second Om, the wish-fulfilling site. Here you…"

Roger Pfister must have given this talk to groups about to undertake the pilgrimage well over a hundred times. He was half Swiss German, half Italian. The Germanic manifested both in his heavy accent and in the firmness of his instructions: "…here you must make your wish which should be prepared beforehand…", the detailed explanations: "…he manifested as a white yak and entered this cave; thus it is an incredibly powerful site", and the clarity about exactly how much good it would do us all: "This is extremely sacred ground with a constant merit of one million times and you will be there still in Saka Dawa so you will have one million times and one hundred thousand times the merit…"

It was Ajahn Sucitto who suggested I arrange our trip through Roger. The Chinese only allow groups organised by official agents, and Roger had been the agent for his pilgrimage a few years before. I immediately liked Roger's attitude. This was his Buddhist service, he wrote; having gained so much from the mountain himself, he wanted to share it with others. But, actually, we had no

choice: it was the prices the other agents quoted which decided it. We couldn't afford to travel in the way Andrew had, with half a dozen Sherpas, plus porters, carrying supplies of Western food brought from Kathmandu. Roger dismissed this as 'travelling like tourists', and said instead he'd find us only a guide, and we'd eat the local food.

Roger had been dismissive of our wish to walk in on the traditional route from Nepal across the Himalayas. This was an 'unnecessary complication'; for him only the kora, the pilgrimage round the sacred mountain, was important. He even offered to accompany us at no extra charge if we were to do the kora alone, driving there direct, but as Ajahn Amaro was to comment after this first meeting, "Roger's suggestions are very helpful, but I'd prefer to then do my own pilgrimage, not Roger's." Roger was a strong character.

His advice, though, was very good. For the kora itself, with which he was so familiar, there were small details like: "You must buy yourself a water bottle holder with a shoulder strap, so you can drink easily. At such altitude everything is effort." And he agreed about the need for a walking stick: "…this is essential so you can lean on it to rest. Sitting down takes too much effort." But Roger's reply when Ajahn Amaro asked how he, himself, first came to do the Kailash pilgrimage was most interesting.

"It was through a visionary dream. I was working here in Nepal as a volunteer. It was '96, and a girl who worked with me spoke about the mountain. I said it has a beautiful symmetry but it's not for me – I'm not a mountain person. Then two weeks later I had this dream and there was the skyline with the mountain and a big red sign pointing, like this." He indicated down with his finger.

"An arrow?" asked Chris.

"Yes, a big red arrow pointing at the mountain. And I knew I had to go there. But it took me three attempts. I made every mistake you can make, but eventually I got there and when I did I got sick like a dog. On that first kora, I had hardly any perception; I just pushed myself, and then I did the kora of Lake Manasarovar. But there everything fell away, I was transformed, and I knew I had

to stay right there by the lake. So I told the others to go on without me. I had my last noodle soup so there was no food to crave and I was just being there all day, just being and watching. It was so joyful."

"That's why you did it again?" I asked.

"Yes. And because exactly the same thing happened four months later when I did a Theravadan meditation retreat in Thailand. That was twenty-six days, with a ten-day retreat, a seventy-two-hour determination, and then another ten-day retreat."

"Yes, I know it," commented Ajahn Amaro.

"Well, at the end of that I realised my passion has to go. I was doing walking meditation and I thought this is like soup without the salt, if you know what I mean." Ajahn said he did. "I realised that if a man transforms into equanimity, then passion has to be let go of first. Next day, an American man said I looked like death. That's because I'd really realised passion has to die. When I told the monk teacher, he said, 'Oh very good, very good' but it didn't feel good to me! I felt terrible. But then, exactly the same as on the kora. Exactly the same! I was transformed again."

"But the first time it seems to have been more joyful, yes? More spontaneous?" Ajahn asked.

"Yes, at the lake I was filled with joy and so creative but on the retreat it was grim, really grim. But then the same thing as happened on the lake. The same thing! The lake was the special place, though. All day there was an owl on the cliff above. When I went back, there were two owls in the same place, so I knew this really was a special place. I've never had this kind of mind set in this life. Because I let go then of everything, in that moment nothing was left.

"So then every year I do the kora. And also I do the same retreat. Because this worked for me. I'm the type of man who when he finds a good restaurant I just keep going to the same restaurant and just observe the slight variations." Roger was as passionate as he was intense. Perhaps that was the Italian in him. "So then I start to give advice to others who want to go. Now this

is what I do as my service. I have done the kora one hundred and two times."

The six of us had three days together in Kathmandu before our departure, to make plans and shop for equipment and supplies. Roger came again, this time with our guide Indra, who'd accompany us to the Tibet border, and Sange Lama came too. During one of those meetings, I mentioned my wish to not feel responsible for our actual pilgrimage so that I could undertake it like everyone else. It was Chris, bless him, who understood what I meant.

"I really appreciate how much you've done to get us here, Nick. So I'd like to take something off you as a thank you. What about the money and expenses? I could be the bookkeeper and carry the cash you've been given for Ajahn Amaro. It's not something I'm naturally good at – numbers and planning budgets – but I'd be happy to try."

So Chris bought himself a little exercise book, quizzed Roger on all the possible costs, noted down how much cash each of us laymen had, and then spent a lot of time staring at pages of calculations and sucking on a pencil. His final conclusion: we'd have just enough if we were careful, and nothing at all to spare.

Rory was to be the photographer for our pilgrimage. It was something I'd thought he'd enjoy as he has some wonderful camera equipment. But when we went to Patan it became apparent he, too, would be taking on something he was not naturally good at. It was wide mountain landscapes and small flowering plants which Rory loved to photograph. When you are shy, taking photographs of people can be daunting.

We were off to Patan because Sister Chini was back, a smile on her craggy face, her short stocky body bustling about and her eyes ablaze with determination. How else do you manage single-handedly to carve out a new niche for nuns in society but be forceful? Sister Chini was like a small armoured vehicle going into battle for the Dhamma. I could see the admiration in Clair's eyes,

impressed as generations of women inclined to the spiritual life have been. It was Sister Chini who inspired Canadian Ayya Medhinandi, 30 years now a nun, to go off to Burma to ordain, while the three young nuns who had been caring for us are just the most recent generation of Nepalese women she has trained.

Sister Chini's family are in Patan's Buddha rupa business, a livelihood that dates back to the original Mahayana monks (and nuns) of the Kathmandu valley, producing and selling those fabulous Nepali Buddha and bodhisattva images cast in bronze with details picked out in copper. She wanted us to meet them. Everyone was to come, driven in a fleet of family cars.

Each of Sister Chini's brothers had a modern house in a compound. On our arrival, the extended family gathered through back yards to the host's house where the monks were arranged on the living room sofas, the family filling the floor with the more junior standing outside peering in. We three laymen and Clair joined the nuns at a table in another room, with Sister Chini at its head. From there she loudly instructed her sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews on the offering of the many dishes. The monastics chanted a blessing and then we all tucked in, served and fussed over by the family. After the clearing, we reassembled for a talk by Ajahn Amaro.

Throughout all this I had to quietly urge Rory to take photos, whispering encouragement. "It's OK. They don't mind. They want their photos taken." Rory's a large man, particularly in Nepal, and he had a very large sophisticated camera. No matter how much he tried to crouch and bend over it, he was still very noticeable.

Ajahn Amaro's talk was about how to lead a happy lay life. It was not the topic which made it such a success but his ability to explain their traditional teachings using modern concepts which resonated, particularly with the younger generation. After he'd finished, everyone was beaming and each of the other brothers wanted him to return for a meal at their house.

I'd hoped we could afterwards go on into the old town of Patan, and maybe visit one of the traditional wooden monasteries set about a cobbled courtyard where the Newari Buddhist monks

used to live, or the workshops where the Buddhas were made. Each suggestion had received a 'yes, yes, we'll see' from Sister Chini, but afterwards, she had us driven to her little nun's vihara in the new part of town. It was a small modern house with a garden of pretty flower beds. Clair commented she could see immediately this was where women lived. We were taken into the shrine room where Sister Chini offered us glasses of fruit juice, explaining, "Now I am too old to live here anymore. Too old to train young nuns. Too much work. They have to do it now." She indicated the three young nuns as she took off her glasses to rub her eyes. She looked tired. "Now I just want to live at the big vihara." Then she started to pull things out from about the shrine. There was something for Ajahn Amaro, something each for the other monks, a beautiful brass jug for me. "I don't need these anymore. I want you to have them." And finally there was the Buddha. It was exquisite, an antique one given by her family to honour her fifty years as a nun, she explained. This she gave to Clair. "You have good meditation. You will use it." All the time we were in Kathmandu, Clair had held a look of wonder on her face – how was all this happening to her? Now her eyes opened wide as that wonder transformed into startled shock at this amazing gift.

Next day, with lots of goodbyes and good wishes for our pilgrimage, we set off for the airport, to take the first of two flights, the only easy way to reach Simikot, the trailhead where the walking would start. We had packs on our backs, boots on our feet and walking sticks in hand. Most were modern light metal walking poles, which clicked as they hit the ground as we walked out of the vihara to the waiting cars, but Ajahn Amaro and I carried wooden staffs which thumped rather than clicked. His was made for him when he was a junior monk in Thailand, from a twisted vine, with the knob forming the handle made from the vine's base. He hadn't used it since he left Thailand but decided to take it on the pilgrimage when he'd heard I was taking one. Mine had been made by a Connemara man I'd only just met. Brian was

on a visit to our house to view some unusual numbered stones Mich had discovered on our local shore and we'd got talking about journeys. I mentioned in passing that I was soon off on a walking pilgrimage to Tibet.

"I'll make you a walking stick, so." I politely replied how that would be nice, not thinking for an instant it might happen.

Two months later he appeared at our door unannounced, having driven from his home to deliver a tall walking staff, which came to just short of my chin, the wider top carved as a head with flowing locks and beard and its base shod with a piece of metal tube. I knew I had no choice but to take it, whether I wanted to or not. And I am extremely grateful I did. For that old Tibetan monk had been right: to go round Mount Kailash, you need a stick, a really good stick. I reckon that walking staff saved my life.

4 The Joy of Being on the Path

That flight into Simikot: wonderful!! A small two-engined gnat of a plane. The Himalayas on such a grand scale that we flew within mountain valleys rather than above them. Looking out at forested slopes, with villages hanging on hillsides and cascading waterfalls, rather than down at them. Ajahn Amaro and I sitting in the front seats, able to see the pilots' view through the open cockpit door. Heading straight at a grey-blue rocky cliff that emerged from the forest, then banking and turning to open up another vista of the valley's further reaches. The loud engine drone and the plane's vibration gave the sense that we were some insect, borne on whirring wings through a landscape sized for it.

I'd asked the co-pilot before we started if the high peaks were visible. "'Fraid not. Loads of cloud today," he'd told me in an Aussie accent. "Didn't get a glimpse." But then, halfway there, the white swirling mass of cotton wadding above us parted, the co-pilot turned to give me a thumbs up, and there, in the distance and so much higher, ridiculously, breathtakingly so, was the main Himalayan range of gleaming white peaks marching in a line into the far West and East.

The pine-covered ridges beside us grew steadily higher, eventually obscuring that mountain vista, and then we were banking again, so close now to the narrowed valley's sides, wondering is this village Simikot? How can we land there? Then banking once again and before us was a terrace, set at our height on the mountain slope, its flatness incongruous amidst so much verticality, green with small wheat fields, dotted with buildings and cut in two by a wide stripe of grey tarmac. A small, tattered

red-and-white wind sock fluttered on a pole to one side. The plane had no need to descend; we just flew in, touched the tarmac and came to a juddering stop. Exhilarated.

We'd been lucky. Roger had warned me over and again that the problem when trekking in from Simikot was this early morning flight into the mountains from Nepalganj, a small border town set on Nepal's narrow strip of the Ganges plain where our jet from Kathmandu had landed. There was no road to Simikot, and the walking route was a week of knee-tearing ascent and descent through river chasms and over ridge after ridge. But at this time of year, with the mounting cloud of the coming monsoon, the daily flight was often postponed day after day and all our subsequent plans would be ruined. That's why he'd insisted we add an extra three spare days at the end of our schedule.

Sure enough, when we arrived the previous evening in Nepalganj, we couldn't stay in our booked hotel as it was full with people from that day's cancelled flights. Then, when we returned to the airport in the early morning as Roger had instructed, it did no good: the first flight filled with the previous day's passengers. So we spent the morning sitting about the drab airport waiting and hoping, as small planes from several companies came and went. Ours was called Tara Air; Ajahn Sumedho had flown with Buddha Air – there's a photo of his group standing smiling in front of the plane. They, too, had been told there was little chance of a flight that day. Their plane, like ours, having flown to Simikot, had several other places to visit. "The pilot decided not to fly again," Anne told me, "but then at the last minute the Jumla flight was cancelled because it was raining there and we were going." Something similar must have happened for us: having given up hope, suddenly we were boarding. Tara Air took off and headed into the hills.

Simikot didn't seem as magical once we'd landed. Several single-storey government buildings and a scattering of crude stone houses with tin roofs stood beyond the airport's dilapidated fence, through which young boys in torn clothes sneaked to pester us for "money, money, money" before the only policeman shooed them

back out again. On our side of the fence there was a long, low reception building fronted with a porch where our papers had to be checked. The bench, running the length of the porch, was already filled with a line of fat middle-class, middle-aged Indians wearing bright nylon puffy parkas and woollen hats: the passengers from a previous flight. When I asked where they were bound the nearest man explained.

"We are going on holy pilgrimage to Shiva's mountain, great Kailash."

"And how will you get there?" I reckoned that surely they weren't going to trek into the mountains. They looked as if they'd struggle to walk a hundred metres.

"We are waiting for helicopter. This will take us to Hilsa on Tibet border, and from there we are taking land cruiser. Our good friend here," he pointed to a man down the bench, beyond their two portly wives who were both munching on packets of Indian snacks, "he is making holy pilgrimage before. He is telling us how wonderful this holy pilgrimage is. So much auspicious. We are very much looking forward."

Meanwhile our monks were getting quietly agitated as it steadily approached noon, when they'd no longer be able to eat because of their rules. Indra, our guide, had assured us there'd be a meal once the papers were checked, but Ajahn commented that inevitably the cooking of it would only happen once we arrived. We laymen weren't affected ourselves – we'd opted in Kathmandu to not keep that rule with them. I'd always done so in the past, but this time the pilgrimage round Mount Kailash seemed enough of an undertaking on its own. However, Ajahn's usual wisdom in these matters proved wrong: once we were though the bureaucracy Indra marched us briskly up the village's steep main street to turn into a guest house where, thanks to his warning, they were expecting us with a hot meal served as soon as we were seated. Indra had been told by Roger about the inflexibility of the Theravadan way.

Simikot's fields might be relatively flat, but the track out of town was not. Fed and tea-d, we were climbing straight away; the

steep main street also being the way to Tibet. It was the way to everywhere further up the Karnali valley, in fact; wide, stony and dusty from the passing of so many feet and hooves under a hot sun. We were soon sweating, panting and stopping often as the new altitude, nearly 3,000 metres, sapped the juice from our muscles, but I was happy to finally be under way, to be in these amazing mountains. The view from the top of that climb, once we'd managed to get there and had collapsed by a crude stupa of piled rocks, was stupendous: the valley opened out to the south to reveal foothills in waves descending towards the Indian plain lost in haze. Simikot, now well below us, was a collection of small tin roofs glinting in the sun, with a small plane from another company leaving, its wings swaying as it took flight. Beyond the flat, green terrace was a forested, dark chasm hiding the Karnali river in its depths, while the steep, pine-forested slopes opposite us rose to become ridge tops covered in snow, obscured in places with remnants of cloud.

The first days on long treks are always joyous for me – it's the simplicity and freedom of being underway on the path. Even in the Himalayas, where the ups and downs are so precipitous, the physical difficulties are nothing compared to that joy. After that long climb we plunged straight down again, sliding sometimes on the reddish dust underfoot, passing through pine woods dry and silent in the day's heat, and small clearings with occasional mud houses – Indra exchanging a few words with their owners – until eventually we were at the bottom, just above the churning Karnali River. Here we were in a completely different land: oak forest, with sprawling thick-leaved rhododendrons under the deciduous trees, some still coming into full leaf. The forest had been partially cleared but, dampened by the nearby river and cooled by the cold air following the rushing water down the valley, the trunks were adorned with ferns and mosses. Small birds twittered, flitting from branch to branch, and cicadas droned.

The Karnali is big, even here well up into the mountains, and its valley slices deep because it comes from Tibet's high plateau, one of few rivers to have cut their way through the Himalayan wall.

Each of these defiles has provided an ancient trade route into Tibet. Only two are open today, both in Nepal, as those in India have been closed by the border dispute with the Chinese. The other route has a road that now leads from Kathmandu all the way to Lhasa, but our route can still only be followed on foot. That is, unless you take the helicopter. Red and white, it clattered past every few hours, sometimes overhead, sometimes beneath us, each time flying half a dozen portly Indians up the valley or flying back down to pick up more.

We sat resting against boulders above the river, expressing our wonder at the beauty around us. Everyone seemed as happy as me: Indra had his party underway; the monks were undertaking their traditional tudong, wandering homeless; the porters were being paid to have a small adventure; even Rory, who'd had an awful night in Nepalganj, his big body far too hot in a stuffy room (I escaped to the roof) and so dozy from a sleepless night that he'd lost his mobile phone in Simikot. He was now pottering about murmuring the names of familiar plants. This alpine zone was akin to our own climate. Amongst the most notable plants were the stands of aquilegia, with their pale purple flowers like tasselled hats.

I introduced Ajahn Sumedho to walking in nature like this in the summer of 1986. It was a privilege to be able to share this with the teacher who introduced me to the joy of walking the spiritual path. Ven. Anando, American and enthusiastic, then the senior monk of our small monastery in Northumberland, asked me to organise a week walking the Pennines, the lumpy backbone of northern England. We started out from the monastery one summer morning, spent the first night by a lonely reservoir where we swam in the evening light, crossed the South Tyne valley and followed the Roman wall to climb into the Pennine fells heading south. A week later we were at Malham in flower-spotted limestone grassland, Ajahn Sumedho teasing me about something, I can't recall what, only the embarrassment I felt. There he was collected and driven back south. He'd enjoyed it so much he asked to go again the following year, this time taking Ven. Amaro (not

an Ajahn then) with him.

I've only a few memories now of those two walks but several strong impressions: how easy Ajahn Sumedho was to be with, not expecting anything and putting up un-complaining with any discomfort, even with the boots that Anando had borrowed for him for his large feet, size fifteen I think. They seemed to be fine when we started, but on the third day Anando, in that direct way he had, started to nag at Ajahn Sumedho, "Ajahn, your posture as you walk needs correcting."

"Yes?"

"You're leaning way over to the left."

"Yes."

"You really should do something about it."

Silence.

Anando returned to that subject twice more before Ajahn Sumedho finally replied.

"My right foot is excruciatingly painful because the boot is too small." His right foot was swollen from a glandular infection he'd caught in Thailand as a young monk which had given him trouble ever since. After that, Anando massaged that foot every evening and said nothing more about posture.

I recall being corrected myself by Anando. I'd told someone we met that we were on a walking holiday. Anando immediately interrupted to tell them we were on a spiritual pilgrimage – my description sounded far too lax to him. The next day an old farmer got talking to Ajahn Sumedho. As they leant on a fence together, with me and Anando standing nearby, the farmer also asked what we were up to. "We're having a walking holiday," Ajahn Sumedho replied.

On those walks we carried everything on our backs, particularly mine. I'd often hump the food for us all as well as my own camping gear. I've always carried my gear, it keeps it simple and honest – you don't take anything that isn't necessary when you have to carry it every day. That's why I'd been reluctant to use porters for this pilgrimage. In the Himalayas in the past I'd looked with disdain at trekkers passing me on the regular trails followed

by small knock-kneed locals laden with their excessive gear. Andrew Yeats felt the same about their pilgrimage. So he'd proposed that only Ajahn Sumedho, being in his sixties, would have everything carried for him, and then agreed that Alison could do the same. The rest of the party could carry their own belongings: clothes, sleeping bag, mat and anything else they wanted to bring, though the porters would carry their tents, along with the food and other gear supplied by the travel agents, so they could set up the camp.

When porters had been mentioned for our pilgrimage I'd suggested we use pack horses or mules instead, as we had in the Atlas Mountains. I knew Colin Thubron had done so on the same route: 'our party is small and swift: a guide, a cook, a horse man, myself'. But Roger had dismissed the notion. Only porters were possible, and my companions had no problems using them. So I'd let go of my pride and Indra had hired three young guys in Simikot who now walked ahead of us, bowed down with two packs each, tied together and strung by wide straps from their foreheads. I was glad I'd given in, right from my first step up the steep track leading out of Simikot. Like Ajahn Sumedho, I was now too old to carry everything. Just walking up the hill was hard enough. With my breath laboured, legs aching and having to stop frequently, I laboured along at the back. Just my little pack with an extra thermal layer, waterproof jacket, water bottle and my binoculars was more than enough.

At Paninaula Tea Shop, Dandaphaya 3, Humla (as its sign proclaimed) I bought tea for all the party. They were collapsed on the inviting rough-hewn benches in the shade of a large tree or sat against the establishment's mud-and-stone wall, the porters' loads perched on a large rock for easier re-lifting. One of the monks, I can't recall which but not Ajahn Amaro, noted 'cold drinks' on the sign. Couldn't they have a Pepsi? I bought them one each but refrained myself, knowing that Pepsis have to be carried in on someone's back for several days. When we came to pay, the two Pepsis cost more than two rounds of tea for ten. The monks looked chastened and never asked for one again. Our budget was

too tight.

On the first part of the trek we were amongst people who migrated long ago up these valleys from the Indian plain, adapting and evolving to suit their new world. They still looked vaguely Indian, these tribes, or castes, of the lower mountains (here it is the Thakuri) but they are shorter, stockier, with strong, bandy legs for all that climbing. The old men wear Indian-style clothes: jackets and jodhpurs in unbleached cotton, stained with orange patches by the local soil, a scarf wound round their head as a turban, or if more sophisticated, the addition of a rimless Nepali hat and perhaps a dark waistcoat. Younger men, like our porters, wear Western clothes: jeans, baseball cap, sneakers. All the women, however, are traditionally garbed: colourful, long skirts (saris would never work in this terrain) and head scarves, gold rings in noses and hanging from ears, bracelets and ponderous necklaces of large semi-precious stones, lapis lazuli blue or a terracotta orange.

Where there's a flat bottom to the valley, small, vibrant, green paddy fields line the river. They also ascend, terraced here and there onto the hillsides, following a side stream, and fringed with walnut trees now coming into light green leaf. There are also water buffalo. When our path emerged from the woodland onto the less steep terraced slopes, there below us were two of them, harnessed to a wooden plough trudging through wettened earth. The rest of the terraced fields, away from water, rise up the valley sides everywhere that is not too steep, ascending way beyond our path, and are yellower green with young wheat or barley. Not the small field we camped in that night, though. It had been set aside by a family in the adjacent house in the hope of receiving a party such as ours. We paid them a small sum for pitching each tent, but it was the provision of our meals which was their main financial reward. Indra was already in their house when we arrived, crouched with a woman beside the iron stove, helping to prepare tea and food. They were also Hindu. This woman had a dark red bindi dot on her forehead and there were small, white shrines amidst the fields. The one below us had a trident on its roof

indicating it was dedicated to Shiva.

The small, cultivated areas alternated with steeper, forested slopes. Next day our path wandered through both. Amongst the fields there were wonderful views. As the path wound in and out, I was either looking up the valley to the line of our party, usually with Ajahn Amaro stomping along at the front, and beyond, to the forested buttresses overlapping one after another to a distant notch in the mountain wall; or I was facing out, scanning the slopes opposite, spotting an eagle being pestered by ravens which climbed to swoop down on it as it hunted along a cliff, or simply gazing up at the snow-capped ridges. In the forested sections we lost the views but were closer to wild nature, with the sweet scent of jasmine which grew twisted over boulders amidst the pines, sprawling rose bushes decked out in pink flowers, and the high-pitched rattle of spotted nutcrackers. I'd occasionally spot one of the nutcrackers atop a pine tree. The path in the forest or fields was mostly level so that as we went on, the river slowly rose to meet us. Then when we came to a forested slope that was nearly vertical we descended steeply again to meet the water.

Until I sat down to write this account I'd forgotten how immensely enjoyable those first days of walking in Humla were, that joy obscured by later difficulty. The enjoyment was the same for Ajahn Sumedho's party when they went this way fifteen years before. Both Anne and Alison were lyrical in their praise: "The sun catching a field of millet red on the opposite hill side, seeing a black bear down in the valley, the noise of the river roaring past, coming across a goat train bringing salt down from Tibet – a great long train of goats – then arriving in a village and all the kids were coming out with walnuts for us, so generous and so pleased. You got the usual one asking 'one penny, one penny', but they were lovely kids." They were walking at the end of the season; Alison also recalled "stopping off for lunch and lying down in the sun on a roof where they were drying grain."

They both recalled how enthusiastic Ajahn Sumedho was. Anne recalled coming to "a particularly beautiful part, down by the river, sitting there and him saying 'you know, it doesn't get any

better than this, Anne' and then he recited that poem, the Blake one, you know, 'He who binds to himself a joy does the winged life destroy. But he who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise.'" Andrew recalled receiving that affirmation, too. "He kept saying to me, 'Well done, Andrew, this is wonderful.'" Ajahn Sumedho's good at that.

Anne also enjoyed the group sitting together in the mornings in one of the tents. "I don't recall doing much actual meditation, but the monk's chanting was lovely and I remember the atmosphere with the glowing lamp and the pendant."

The group also had a daily sharing each evening. "It was a Findhorn thing," Andrew explained. "How did the day go for you? How are you feeling? Where do we stop for lunch tomorrow? That kind of thing. It was all very harmonious. Michael didn't come to the morning sittings, he had his own practice, and he wasn't keen on joining the sharings. But that was fine. We were all getting on well."

"Did you all walk together?"

"Well, I'd said as a policy I thought we should walk behind Ajahn, so we go at his pace. Walk as a group. But right from the start Sugato completely ignored that. He shot off. He was always way off in front. I thought as the junior monk he would be with Ajahn. But me, David and Anne stayed with him."

Alison wasn't there either; she mostly walked at the back, she told me, to be on her own and enjoy the wonderful scenery. That's what I did on our walk up through Humla. I suspect I might also have had a problem with the daily sharings.

Rory struggled for the first few days. He's a large young man, with a slight shuffling gait and clothes that always seem to be slipping off his rotund form. In fact, he looks like someone totally unsuitable for the mountains he so loves. However, rather like the children's cartoon character Kung Fu Panda, he has hidden depths and in the mountains can be impressively adroit. But here in the lower foothills he was a lumbering bear out of his habitat. Too hot,

sweating profusely and still suffering the effects of his sleepless night in Nepalganj. I suspected he was also dehydrated, as he felt nauseous every time he tried to eat and so ate little. Appamado also had nausea and a constant slight migraine. But the two of them were the youngsters in our party, so despite their difficulties they easily kept up, something not so easy for me, even though I felt fine.

At the end of the first day Indra sent one of the porters back to help me, but I gently refused to give over my bag and then, when I got to our camp, explained how I liked to walk alone like that, particularly at the end of the day, when an encounter with wildlife was most likely. There was no need for Indra's concern and I didn't want a young porter trailing after me. But, if truth be told, I was also struggling: I'd needed to go at that slower pace.

The second evening I arrived last and alone after a long final climb, the hardest so far, done on jelly-like legs. There I found we were staying with a Tibetan tribal family. We were now amidst the Bhotia, one of the tribes who'd descended long ago from the Tibetan plateau into Nepal's upper Himalayan valleys. That morning we'd still been passing through Thakuri communities, although at breakfast we'd been told the small clearings with a few houses higher up the valley sides belonged to a Tibetan people.

In the afternoon those valley sides had grown more precipitous, still covered in their natural dense forest. Our path descended, squeezed between the steep slope and the river, which rushed beside us over its bed of boulders, grey-green with silt and turbulence, its roar mingling with the song of nightingales. In places the path had been cut into rock, with fine waterfalls descending over fern and moss-greened walls, and once passing under a large, overhanging philadelphus covered in white blossom, to become strewn with white petals. Then, most spectacularly, a way had been crudely cut into the side of a vertical cliff jutting out over the water, with steps that we climbed bent forward to avoid snagging ourselves on the roof. The path clambered out of the river's defile and then went on upwards, a long, hard climb before levelling out in the clearing on a slope not quite as steep as the

rest, with a few Bhotia houses. The buildings were much the same as those further down the valley: rock walls of brown-orange stone interrupted every few feet by horizontal pine trunks traversing the full length of the wall, with a flat mud roof, perhaps a couple of windows beside the door, and a stove pipe emerging from the roof or a small side window. The back of the house was often built into the slope, as was the house our party stopped at.

Some of the Bhotia are Hindu, but this family were definitely Buddhist: our host, Ajahn told me, had been listening to a Dharma talk by the local monastery's head lama on his mobile phone when they arrived. His mobile phone was now quietly playing Tibetan music (I recognised the looping rhythms) as he stood respectfully to one side gazing at his new guests sitting on the bench in front of his house. He was a small, scrawny man, skin burnt as brown as those of the people down the valley. But he had a slightly broader face, more Mongolian.

The Bhotia have always been treated as low caste by the people of the lower hills and this family were certainly the poorest we had stayed with so far. They had no rice or barley, Indra told us, only buckwheat, no chickens, so there would be no eggs, and no cow, so there would be no milk. They were devout, relying on the sense of the spiritual to ease their daily burden. The man's mobile phone next played Buddhist monks chanting at the local monastery and both he and his wife whispered along as they went about their tasks. She had returned with a pile of greenery wrapped in a shawl on her back, to make our breakfast subjee, but also with two gashed cuts on her hand. Appamado, ever concerned for others, had noticed and produced our medical kit which he carried. He asked Chris to treat her. She seemed softened and pleased by the concern as Chris bathed and covered her cuts, as she whispered along with the chant all the while.

Later, having erected his tent, Ajahn Amaro was sitting on the front bench looking at the map, our host standing quietly nearby. Ajahn tried pointing out and naming places. Our host nodded enthusiastically at each name, repeating it to show his familiarity with the places we had passed through, then with those we'd go

through next, up the valley, then those into Tibet, and finally the kora round Kailash. He knew all of them. When Indra came out he was able to translate. Our host had done the kora himself eight times. Later we sat there quietly with him, in the fading light, me pumping water though our filter to the rhythm of his mobile phone's chant, all of us gazing out at the forested mountainside and the snowy peaks above and beyond. In the half-light a black bear ambled fast down a patch of snow on the hill opposite before disappearing back into forest.

Indra, our guide, was Tamang, another Tibetan-related tribe who live further to the east, in the high mountain valleys along the border above Kathmandu as well as some of the higher hills just to the west of the capital. I'd been amongst his people when walking through central Nepal with Ajahn Sucitto and already knew they have a similar poor existence. The altitude we were now at is too high to grow rice or wheat so they live on barley, millet and buckwheat as their staples; they also graze yaks and goats in degraded forest and spend long winters waiting for the snow to melt. But as Indra pointed out, at least his people live near Kathmandu, where they can find work as mountain guides and porters, while these Bhotia were a long way from anywhere. This family lived on particularly poor land, he told us. It was too steep to terrace properly so the soils were thin. The crops growing around us were stunted and patchy.

Such a poor but devout house felt a good place to stay. Indra said our hosts felt so honoured to have the monks they'd said payment wasn't needed — not that he would listen to that. That night the family was further blessed by having Ajahn Amaro sleep above them on their earthen roof, one of the few flat places for our tents.

The next morning we had buckwheat pancakes with our vegetable subjee. Mine was more like a very large flattened dumpling than a pancake, but still welcome. We ate sitting outside on the bench again, as the valley took on light. The snow-covered tip of a mountain showed above the still-darkened ridges, lit cream with the sun's first rays. Rory told us it must be a 7,000-metre-plus

peak to have caught the sun like that, perhaps Saipal Himal. Before he came he'd studied their names and positions, hoping to tick them off.

The track was benign that day: flat and sandy under foot, winding in and out of the valley's creases. Through these cultivated clearings its upper side, to our right, had white-flowering cotoneaster, grazed into an undulating small wall. Within its gnarly protection delicate plants grew, such as thyme, their tiny colourful flowers often poking out on long stalks. The fields were of barley, feathered heads starting to plump up, catching the sun as they waved in the dry wind. There were occasional hawthorn or amelanchier bushes amidst the fields, and sparrows and other small birds flitted about before it got too hot. But most of the time we were in woodland, now with tall pines and an understorey of juniper, partially cleared by wandering yak and dzo (a cross between yak and cow) grazing at tufts of vegetation. We passed two men sawing a section of pine trunk along its length with a two-handed saw. The trunk had been rolled onto a crude platform made of branches so that one man could stand beneath while the other stood atop the trunk. Several other sections lay nearby waiting their turn. Further on we could see how they built new platforms for each felling rather than move the sections of trunk.

Most people we passed were locals, working in the fields or walking to their homes. We met few other travellers – only people from further up the valley making their way to Simikot, carrying a large sack of produce on their back or their personal belongings in a bundle. Only twice did we pass laden mules and never the large trains of pack animals carrying produce down from Tibet that Colin Thubron and others describe. We were too early in the season, travelling in late May in the hope the high passes would be open in time for us to cross, travelling so early because Ajahn Amaro had a meeting of abbots to attend in Thailand in June. When I arranged the journey Roger reckoned the effects of global warming would ensure our passage, but when we met in Kathmandu he told us the winter's snows had been exceptional,

the passes were still blocked so that a German party had been forced to fly in the red-and-white helicopter. We could still try walking, he said. Maybe by the time we got there, the passes would be open. Or we could take the red-and-white helicopter like the Germans. But then Sange Lama reported news from his brother: the first pilgrims had arrived at the monastery that day from over the pass; the passes could be traversed but only on foot and they were very difficult. Now we were travelling in the hope that the difficulty would have eased by the time we passed over them – descending the precipitous northern side through deep snow drifts would not be fun – but so far we'd met no one who'd come that way to ask.

Late morning, we climbed down into a pine-forested gorge, to cross a tributary of the Karnali on a swinging metal suspension bridge. At the bottom of the gorge everything was on a much grander scale: giant boulders, towering spruces with their hanging branches swishing above needle-carpeted ground, a wide track leading to the bridge, and tall bright green poplars standing sentinel along the main river. We disturbed six vultures sitting on a cliff ledge across the roaring water. They took flight on laboured wing beats, climbing to turn on a thermal, their vast wings outstretched. There was also, incongruously, a rusting yellow bulldozer at the start of a road. How had that ever got here? We climbed back out of the gorge, on the dirt road. When the main valley opened out before us the slopes were less steep. There were grass meadows with grazing horses by the river, larger terraced fields, few trees and many more houses. And we could see Yalbang, our destination, in the distance. We knew it must be Yalbang because of a large white Tibetan stupa standing on a promontory in front of the largest group of buildings, its white plaster matching the snow peaks beyond. Presumably the buildings were the monastery, Namkha Khyung Dzong.

As each chanting monk twisted his upright hand-drum in time to the deep beat of the main drum, the turquoise drum faces

flashed in a row together, lit by the shaft of light coming through the temple's large, open door. The colour, surely chosen because of this, was the triangulated opposite of the deep ruby and yellow of the monk's robes: the line of flashing turquoise startled in the gloom of the temple – off on, off on, off on, off on….

Two double rows of monks faced each other as they chanted their deep resonating homage, the words so familiar that their chanting books were now set aside, each monk twisting his right hand to work his drum in the gloom. Bom bom, bom bom, bom bom, bom bom, bom bom….

The tiered altar flickered with the light from butter lamps, revealing half-seen Vajrayana images in various contorted poses, as one monk, standing between the others but facing the altar, performed an elaborate offering: prostrating full length before shuffling forward with bowl, then silk scarf, then other objects, all the while the temple resonating with the chant and the hypnotic rhythm. Bom bom, bom bom, bom bom, bom bom, bom bom….

The lay people lining the temple walls – women in traditional garb, young men in jeans and T-shirts – were now rising to join the bowing. Hands held palms together and pushed above their head, they bowed, knelt, and then prostrated full length face down, hands sweeping out before them on the dusty floor, their movements in time to the chant. Bom bom, bom bom, bom bom, bom bom, bom bom….

The total effect made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. This was the culmination of three days of homage during which the monks had fasted, kept silent bar the endless chanting and then for the last day also refrained from drinking. Now they had eaten tsampa, quaffed yak-butter tea and were celebrating the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha. Saka Dawa for the Tibetans, Vesakha Puja for us Theravadans, the full moon of May: the most important celebration in the Buddhist calendar. Bom bom, bom bom, bom bom, bom bom….

Then suddenly, it stopped. Silence. Two trumpets, long to the floor and held two-handed by the monks seated nearest the door, sounded the deep tone of fog horns. Hand drums were lowered

and, instead, small trumpets made from human thigh bones were brought to the lips of the more senior monks, including the two rinpoches seated higher at the altar end of each front row. Then the monks were off onto another chant – a different rhythm, more syncopated and with the adornment this time of their thigh bone trumpet blasts, the crash of two sets of cymbals, occasional blasts of the two long trumpets and other shorter ones, along with the deep beat of the main drum.

We'd arrived at the temple the day before, our Theravada monks having adjusted their dress and tidied themselves for the encounter. We'd also had our meal at a tea house down the hill, to avoid any problems that our monks' rule of not eating after midday might cause. Indra surpassed himself by doing most of the cooking while the proprietress consoled her distraught baby, then taking over the baby-holding duties. Expectant, we'd climbed the last of the slope, wondering which of the large municipal looking buildings we were passing might be part of the monastery (it turned out they all were), and considering where we might camp as Sange Lama had said there'd only be a room for the monks. We passed the white stupa and entered the monastery's main gates. The temple was before us, set at the back of a courtyard created by two wings of accommodation for the Tibetan monks, the traditional layout that goes back to the first Buddhist monasteries.

All was quiet. No one stirred. We mounted the steps to the temple and entered. Flickering butter lamps sat before a giant, golden Buddha image in the gloom. Then, as my eyes adjusted, I made out other images lower down the shrine: elaborate, colour-filled murals on the walls, and sitting at their base, along the back and sides of the temple, old Tibetan women dozing or fitfully twirling prayer wheels. As we knelt to bow to the Buddha between the empty benches meant for the monks, I noticed that three rows back, novices were lying on their backs, some sleeping, others playing with things and some, having noticed us, now sitting up. After we had bowed Ajahn Amaro commented:

"It's just like a festival in north-east Thailand; it's break time and everyone's having a snooze."

By now all the novices were watching us closely, although still none of them spoke, just nudging each other and pointing. Eventually a young monk entered the temple, summoned presumably by someone, and asked us in halting English to follow him. He took us to what must be the refectory for senior monks. Benches with cushions lined the walls, with several short tables set before each. Taking up much of one corner was a giant copper pot, wisps of steam escaping from beneath a battered lid, set on an earthen stove being fed with long, thin sticks by a middle-aged Tibetan woman. A few monks sat mutely on the benches. Only our young host spoke, arranging for tea to be poured directly from a giant copper kettle, which had taken the place of the pot; offering food, which we declined; and apologising for his limited English. He had sufficient English, however, to tell us the monastery had 190 monks, including novices, and that Rinpoche would see us that afternoon, but not until three when he received visitors. Until then his time was for personal practice (a concept he had to mime with hand movements and mumbled chanting).

When we returned to the temple the Tibetan monks were in full deep voice, reciting a text from a stack of long-in-width loose pages which they turned over, away from themselves, as the front was finished, to stack on a second pile where they read the back. Each monk was also performing elaborate, small movements with his hands while holding a brass bell tightly in one palm, which they rang in unison at significant points. The chants went on and on, the older monks gently rocking side to side to the rhythm, the novices getting distracted, looking about, particularly back at us sitting against a side wall, and then returning to their task. The old ladies turned their prayer wheels and mumbled, occasionally getting up to shuffle along to the entrance-way where they would do full-length prostrations towards the altar – now one, now another, occasionally several at the same time. At some point a young man beside us introduced himself. He was a local school teacher. It was he who explained, "This is third day, no food, no

drink, no talk, very hard." Which accounted for all the mute monks.

Pema Riksal Rinpoche was not mute that day, however. He was excused the fast, the secretary told us, as he was diabetic and would join the ceremony only for the last day. Instead he was sitting on cushions at the head of his reception room, a beaming, middle-aged, slightly portly monk who seemed very happy to see us. He told us via the secretary's translation that he had fond memories of Ajahn Sumedho: "A very good monk", and the long talks they'd had; "His understanding was so good." He enquired after our journey, told us that we were most welcome and should we have difficulty getting into Tibet, then we should return and stay for as long as we wished. He then wanted to know from Ajahn Amaro about Ajahn's connections with Tibetan Buddhism which his brother Sange Lama had mentioned. As Ajahn explained, Rinpoche too was deeply impressed. "Oooh, this is my root teacher!" Then, "Oooh, this is my tradition!" Then, "Oooh, this is my own teacher!" And finally, "Oooh, you are teaching with a great dzogchen master!" He became so impressed, he wanted Ajahn to read a book just published in the United States of his translated teachings. "You can tell me how it is. How to make better."

This led to talk of the problems his Nyingma tradition was having in the West, where "they do many bad things." Vajrayana teachings and empowerments were being given out of context so that people were harming themselves and others. He explained how this was a problem throughout the Tibetan tradition: forgetting the importance of morality and good actions as a base for practice. He'd been recently to Thailand and admired the morality of the monks there and the emphasis on that in the Theravada teachings. "But they are not practising view, no meditation!"

Ajahn Amaro agreed with him. "Our teacher said this is like having a garden, planting vegetables and fruit trees and then not eating the produce. But in his forest tradition, which is less than five percent of the monks in Thailand, the emphasis is on

meditation practice, not study."

"Urrmmm, very good, very good."

Rinpoche also liked the way monks in Thailand could leave whenever they wanted. "Vajrayana monks make life vow. They unhappy, they stay. They make everyone unhappy."

We were only with him for an hour before he said his 'duties' called and we should come again tomorrow when the festival was over and we could have more time to talk Dharma. As we left, we met his 'duties' for that day standing at the gate of his compound: a line of lay Tibetans waiting patiently for an audience, each holding a khata, a white silk offering scarf. During this festival many would have travelled a long way.

In the temple that day the ceremony continued, occasionally interspersed with the crash of cymbals or the deep bellow of the long trumpets, but mostly it was hour after hour of the monks chanting, with just the occasional tinkle of their bells, the effect hypnotic but also deadening of any thought. I did rouse myself once to encourage Rory in his taking of photos. Although the scene was photogenic he was so concerned not to cause offence that he hardly dared move from his seat.

When it all ended the schoolteacher leant over to tell us our campsite had been arranged and we were to follow him. By then, the novices had stampeded for the door before us, hurriedly pulling on their robes as they went, leaving the older monks calmly folding away their chanting texts, wrapping each set in a cloth and storing it beneath their desks. As we left, the women began a group circumambulation of the temple outside, singing a lilting chant together and spinning their prayer wheels.

The teacher led us past the rinpoche's compound to stone steps before a door in another wall. Through the door the steps climbed further to a large, flat garden recently planted with rose bushes and a new lawn on which our tents had been pitched by the porters, who were now standing proudly beside them. Beyond them was a recently renovated house, grand by the standards of those we had seen so far. We reckoned it must be meant for the rinpoche – perhaps he was about to move here. But whatever it

was, it made a fabulous campsite for us. The newly sown lawn was soft and flat and the raised ground had views across the valley.

Later, while adjusting my tent at dusk, a light came on in the entrance hall of the house and a monk appeared at the door. He indicated for me to come over. I realised as I approached that this was a young monk we'd seen in the refectory sitting on his own. He was chubby, dressed in new robes and was treated there with diffidence by the other young monks. I'd had a sense of loneliness, and wondered who he was. He now indicated for me to follow him, showed me where the light switch was, then took me through to a bathroom, which had a toilet, shower and sink, and pointed at me and them. Ah, I understood, nodded, said thank you and then returned to the tents to tell the others. Talking it over we reckoned that he must be a young rinpoche and this was his house and garden, which we now had the use of.

That night, lying in my tent, I recalled Stephen Batchelor telling me about how rinpoches were usually in pairs in Tibet. I'd asked him about his visit in October 1984 when the Chinese first opened Tibet to travellers.

"So did you visit monasteries there?" We were in the gorge, splashing through the river with shallow water flowing fast over shining multi-coloured round stones.

"Yes, and it was a real eye-opener after my time with the Tibetans outside Tibet. Naively, I'd ask, 'How many lamas are there in this monastery?' and they'd say 'two', but there'd be hundreds of monks running around! I came to understand that every monastery supports two lines of reincarnate lamas. Lama actually means reincarnate. So, say you have a monastery with a thousand monks, you'd have two lam ram, or households, which would be the residence of the tulkus, who are referred to with the honorific Rinpoche, and they'd be like little aristocrats with a standard of living way above that of the average monk. You'd have monks like my teacher Geshe Rabten – when he was young he was near to starving – and you'd have two tulku in the same monastery living like lords with servants and cooks and secretaries and they would have properties outside the monastery: farms,

estates, which would generate income. So the monastery was also the social nexus which supported a feudal system within it. The tulku's spiritual wealth resides in the fact they are lineage holders of certain tantric traditions, so they'd give initiations every now and again when the lay people, and even other monks, would make offerings in gratitude for receiving these initiations. The initiations were the capital that the monastery ran on."

"Those big monasteries in Tibet seem like universities to me," I said. "Was that the outcome of the emphasis in later Buddhism on the teacher and his teachings? So then, in turn, the teachings had to get more special to bring in the support for all the student monks and then the teachers needed to be reincarnated to keep the income coming in. Or is that too simplistic?"

"No, that's not simplistic. The whole monastery survived that way. In the old days, before 1959, every seven years the tulku and his entourage would go off on long tours for one or two years with trains of yaks. They'd go from village to town, often ending up in China. Everywhere they went they'd give initiations and in return people would offer bags of barley, gold jewellery, money or whatever. When they returned, this income would pass down into the monastic system. And a monastery had to have two tulkus so they were likely to always have one adult to earn the money. The tulkus who escaped Tibet – and, of course, most of them did because they were the elite – were then divorced from their monasteries, so it was only when I went there that I understood how it all worked. Tibetan lamas outside of Tibet still do tours today but now it's southeast Asia – Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong – giving these initiations to hundreds of people, mostly Chinese, and getting huge amounts of money which they use to support their own entourage, their own lifestyle, but also to fund their monastery and other institutions. Some of them use initiation tours to fund charity work in Tibet, so it's not all self-gain. But that's how the economics of it works, by and large, and throughout Tibet's history the main source of revenue has been the Chinese."

Next morning we were summoned to the temple by the deep, reverberating blast of monks blowing into large, white conch shells. When I arrived, the other monks, including ours, were already inside, but the women were standing in a group beside the entrance. So I hung back to see what would happen, standing beside the two trumpeters who waited with their conch shells held before them. Then the wooden door in the compound wall swung open and as Pema Riksal Rinpoche emerged, the conch shells blasted a long greeting which continued as he and his small entourage crossed the compound, with the women now singing the same undulating tune they had the previous evening. Rinpoche passed them, nodding a greeting, touching a few of the bowed heads as a blessing, and entered the temple, followed by his entourage and then by the still-singing women. Myself and the two monks, now without their conch shells, brought up the rear.

The ceremony went on for most of the day. Some of it, like the turquoise drums, was really spectacular, but much was just more of the endless chanting. After some chant that had seemed particularly significant there was a stop for breakfast, brought round in galvanised buckets and doled out by novices with galvanised ladles. We were given bowls into which they slopped roasted barley stew with little bits of meat and a skin of rancid butterfat. "Now all can eat and talk," commented the teacher next to us, rather unnecessarily, above the noise of the chatting novices. During the break for lunch, provided for all in another building, six images of bodhisattvas were carried in, each with a piece of red cloth tied to cover their eyes, followed by trays with elaborate, sculptured offerings made of coloured butter. The returning monks first made their way along the altar to admire all this, many having their photo taken in front of them – which helped Rory with his photography shyness.

Mid-afternoon, there was a sudden roar outside and a whirlwind of dust at the door, followed by a downpour of enormous hailstones, driving people out in the courtyard, running, into the porch's shelter. It lasted only fifteen minutes but left the entire courtyard glistening with a layer of white beads.

Later the monastic ceremony came to a crescendo, too, with everyone – monks, laypeople and us – flinging barley grains in all directions, so that the floor inside was similarly covered.

Our monks felt obliged to sit through all the ceremony, a small line of Theravada ochre amidst all that ruby red, but Chris, Rory and I took several long breaks, climbing the hillside behind the monastery to sit under a tree and enjoy the view across the valley, the temple's chanting now a quiet murmur no louder than the bird song around us.

After the puja was over we met Pema Riksal Rinpoche again, now with a better translator and another brother, this one with long black hair tied in a ponytail and only partial monastic clothes. He'd also been in the puja that day, promoted above the other monks despite being a layman. With the translator there Rinpoche could give us a discourse on what dzogchen was and was not. He quoted instances of people believing they knew dzogchen when they did not and offered a formula for recognising it with lines like "If there is light this is not dzogchen." But when he stated that dzogchen was something that Theravada did not know, Ajahn Amaro told him how Ajahn Sumedho had spent the last fifteen years teaching nothing else but the use of pure awareness. "When Ajahn Sumedho visited America, Tibetan Buddhist practitioners told him 'you're teaching dzogchen' to which he replied, 'I don't know what dzogchen is, but if you say so, then that's fine by me.'"

Ajahn told Rinpoche that he liked his book, which somehow, amazingly, he'd managed to read most of, presumably through the night. He commented that it had little 'self' in it, unlike some others. During their conversation an old Tibetan man came in to pay respects before leaving to travel home, prostrating and shuffling forward to offer a khata, to be touched on the head as a blessing and draped with the scarf.

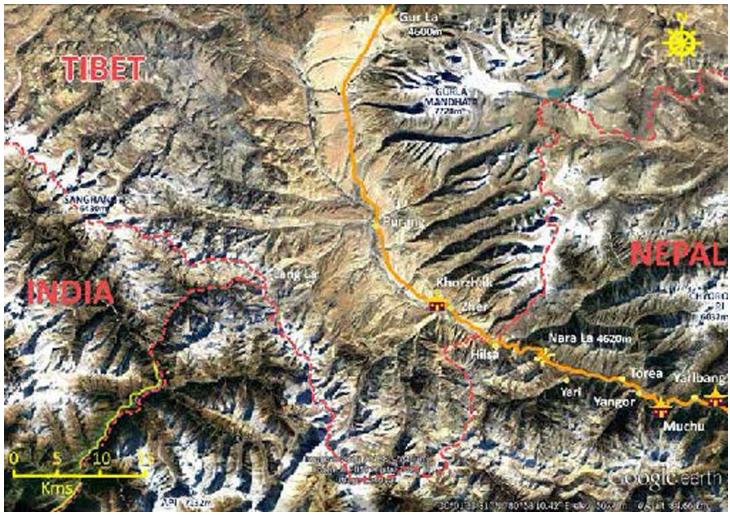
We also heard more of their family history. I can't recall now what was told to us then or earlier by Sange Lama in Kathmandu, but their father, a Nyingma tulku named Degyal Rinpoche, was descended both by reincarnation and family line from teachers who had come to hold sway in the Tibetan plain and valleys to the

south of Mount Kailash, with many disciples who practised as hermits in remote caves. It was the father who conceived of re-establishing their main monastery over the border in Nepal, away from Chinese suppression, in what previously had been a peripheral area of their influence but now had many Tibetan refugees. He sent both boys to be trained by Trulshik Rinpoche, who, unusually for the Nyingma-pa, was a monk and was trying to re-establish monasticism within their tradition. While they were young their father had become too ill himself to set up a monastery, so Pema Riksal Rinpoche had taken this on as his duty, with Sange Lama doing all that was needed in Kathmandu, including setting up their own website. On that website one can now view pictures of the monastery and be informed about all of its various activities. There was none of this when Ajahn Sumedho visited – only the just-completed temple.

Afterwards I asked Ajahn Amaro what he thought of the reincarnation of Tibetan teachers. He said he had no problem with it. Perhaps they really were reincarnated, or if not, the system worked well for their tradition, producing some great teachers, like the Dalai Lama. But, as with anything else, it was open to abuse. "The Dalai Lama has often hinted at how much corruption there is. With so much money and power there's a lot of temptation when recognising a tulku. Like the monk in the book 'Fire under the Snow' who spent thirty-three years imprisoned by the Chinese, being tortured, without ever wishing them harm. He was a simple farm boy who had all the auspicious signs, but then the local lord of the manor had his son made the reincarnated lama."

"Arh, I see what you mean."

"And if you're a reincarnated lama, and a layman, it must be very tempting to look at your son…"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5 Working with Others

We tumbled down the slope on leaving the monastery; after two days' rest everyone was overflowing with energy. Then we bowled along the wide track at the valley bottom, which was again halfway to becoming a road, flanked with stone retaining walls. From there the path led into a gorge, with light-green, shimmering poplars standing bolt upright beside the river, creating a delicate contrast to the dark, twisted pine trees on the dry slopes above. Ajahn Amaro admired the rose bushes which sprawled beside the path, commenting how exquisite the delicate pink of their flowers was against the grey-green of the churned river water. He was right – in fact, the whole scene was delightful – but I wasn't enjoying it myself. Instead I was worrying. I was concerned that with our enthusiasm we had gone the wrong way. The new road had parted from the old track as we entered the gorge, and was now climbing the valley side above us. I was also concerned that Rory and Ajahn Amaro were just taking photos of the lovely scenery, but not including people, which is what I would need for a book. I'd tried mentioning that to both of them: Ajahn Amaro was not impressed. And I was concerned about all that energy: Appamado and Rory, the two youngsters in the party, were rushing along so that both were out of sight. That's how we could have taken the wrong route, my mind yammered, and it was how we'd end up doing something else foolish.

Eventually the beauty of the gorge overcame my worries. I was not responsible. I could just enjoy it. I'd revelled in the lack of responsibility walking up to the monastery, but now that old self, 'walk leader', had reappeared, making it painful for me and painful

for others. "Let it go", I told myself.

So I strolled along at the back again, enjoying the nature: bulbuls flying about in the tree canopy, a flash of crimson beak telling me at least one was a black bulbul; warblers calling from dense vegetation and then the arced flight of a blue magpie crossing the river between two poplar trees, trailing its long tail.

So far, on this pilgrimage, our group was harmonious. Of course, everyone had their own style: Ajahn Amaro walked along with steady determination; Dhammarakkho was the opposite, often ahead but easily waylaid; while Appamado's attention was taken with everyone else's needs. Rory had his lumbering gait while Chris liked to walk at a very steady but slightly slower speed so he didn't stop when we did, but passed through our resting group with a brief salutation. He wore two-tone grey trousers and shirt with a wide-brimmed grey hat, and the way he passed us, often just touching the brim of his hat, brought to my mind 'the lonesome cowboy'. He'd explained on the first evening that he was practising something he'd read on how to keep the focus just on the walking itself. Despite these dissimilarities, everyone, not just Appamado, was also looking out for each other and we were getting on well.

Further on, the old track left the river side, climbing up a bare rock outcrop. There I came round the corner to find most of the party gathered, concerned, around Rory who was lying propped against a rock at the start of the climb. "He's sprained his ankle badly. What shall we do?"

"Get it into cold water to stop it swelling," I told them. Rory got his boot off and Appamado helped him limp to the riverside. "Then he should continue. It might be really painful but it won't do any harm. But tomorrow he'll probably be unable to walk at all."

So we shared out his load, the others then going on ahead for the meal, while Rory and I brought up the rear. Rory limped slowly along, leaning heavily on two walking sticks; I walked behind, wondering how we were to deal with this. It might be days before Rory could walk again and at Hilsa the Chinese land

cruisers Roger had organised would be waiting to drive us to Mount Kailash. Should we leave him at the next stop? That didn't feel right. Or should we hire a mule or pony for him to ride on? But a mule or pony couldn't traverse the snow fields on the high pass…

I also felt partially responsible for his misfortune. I apologised, as he limped along ahead of me, for nagging him about the photos. It was only after my nagging that he'd started to rush ahead, or drop behind, so he could capture the rest of us walking through the scenery.

"It wasn't that," he gasped, in short sentences between limps. "I was enjoying," limp, "having energy," limp, "after the sickness," limp. But still, I knew if I hadn't fussed, he mightn't have done it.

It all felt strangely familiar. I'd been in exactly this same situation with Ajahn Sumedho: he limping along in pain with a sprained ankle, me beside him concerned what to do, and uncomfortably aware of my own contribution. Up until then the walks with him had always gone remarkably well. Any problem that arose with my plans, somehow events would conspire to resolve it. So by the time Ajahn Sumedho asked me if I'd like to go to the Pyrenees, along with Ajahn Sucitto, I'd come to take the fortunate serendipity for granted.

On that walk Ajahn Sumedho was really tired, run down and having problems with his digestion. So we had to take it slowly at first, with lots of stops, but for the last few days, after we had crossed over the Pyrenees into Spain, he was better. There we followed a high valley with wonderful old villages made entirely of the same honey-coloured stone: houses, cobbled streets, enclosed water courses with washing places, church and market place. Ajahn Sumedho even felt fit enough to take the route back to France I'd earlier decided we best avoid – a high pass with a long steep climb that we toiled up for hours, switching back and forth across the slope under a hot sun. We made the top in the late afternoon, but it was there that I got things wrong. Delighted to have made the pass and knowing that we now only had to descend to a small French town below, where we would be catching a bus

next morning, I relaxed. When we set off again I went on ahead, enjoying the view out across the more steeply incised and wooded French valleys, and scanning the slopes for ibex, paying no heed to my companions. The pace I set was too fast for Ajahn Sumedho so that he tripped on a boulder and twisted the ankle of his bad foot.

I knew immediately, as I did with Rory, that I had to keep him moving, and get him down the mountain as far as I could, but he was in a lot of pain as he limped slowly along. Then, from nowhere, a mountain thunderstorm gathered above us, rumbling ominously and darkening the sky. Soon we were struggling along in heavy rain with lightning flashing about the high peaks above us. We were suddenly into a hell realm. There was no shelter and anyway I knew we shouldn't stop. It was heart-rending walking slowly behind him, he sodden and limping in pain. And me blaming myself.

Eventually, after a couple of hours, Ajahn Sumedho could go no further. The storm had passed and we could see a small hamlet way beneath us. But we were on a rough, stony track descending a steep slope. The only flat place was a turn in the track, just large enough to erect his small tent. Inside we laid out his mat and sleeping bag and helped him in. He sat there looking completely drained. Then Sucitto asked him, "Is there anything else we can do, Ajahn?"

"In the small pocket in the top of my pack."

"Yes?"

"There's a cigar."

He'd been given it by George Sharp, who knew he'd once smoked them. George said it was in case it all got too difficult. Sucitto took the cigar from the little tube it was in, lit it, and passed it to Ajahn Sumedho who sucked slow and long, waited, and then gave out a very long sigh.

Next day the hell realm was over. At first light we left him in his tent and followed the old track down to the village, where there was a telephone box and a small shop had just opened. I telephoned the friend we were to stay with that night, Sue Lunn-Rockliffe, who offered to drive the three hours it would take to

come and get us, then we climbed back with breakfast. We even made him coffee on our little stove. When Sue got to the hamlet, she insisted her old French 2CV could drive up the track – that's what they were made for, she assured us, and she was right. We had to clear the track in places, but she got all the way to Ajahn Sumedho. That afternoon we were sitting in the shade of a grapevine on the patio of an old French farmhouse that Sue and her partner, Neil, had just finished renovating to let. It felt like heaven.

It was that experience that led me to warn Andrew Yeats that when you organise a trek for Ajahn Sumedho everything will go unusually well, but if something should go wrong, it can do so spectacularly. And if that happens not to take it personally.

Rory's sprained ankle didn't seem as bad as Ajahn Sumedho's. We were slow, but we didn't have to stop. Eventually, way above us, there was Appamado standing on a crag, looking back down the path, concerned. As well as our meal waiting for us, Indra had a basin of cold water for Rory to soak his foot. He'd found another family who provided way-side meals – this time in a shelter against their house roofed with a blue tarpaulin. After a good rest, bathed in blue light, Rory felt he could go on, put up with the pain, and that the twisted ankle would eventually be all right. He'd twisted ankles in the mountains several times, he told us, because one of his legs is slightly shorter than the other. That's why he ambles along in the way he does.

The meal was the same every day in Humla: dhal bhat, rice and lentils, usually with some kind of vegetable, this time potatoes. It's the basic food of Nepal, the fuel that porters run on and the only food available at the tea houses we ate at. The rest of us had no problem with it but Rory was still feeling nauseous and Dhammarakkho had explained in Kathmandu that he needed to eat meat. "When I became a monk I tried being vegetarian but it didn't suit my body. I have to have meat." On the pilgrimage he was always on the lookout. "Have you got any meat?" "Is there any meat, Indra?" But there never was. Chris asked him once what he'd like, if he could get whatever he wanted, "Well, bacon, egg

and sausage. Nothing can beat that!" But there was only ever dhal bhat.

That meal stop had been in a village named Muchu, where my small map marked another monastery. As we rested I asked Indra about it, who then asked our host. Yes, it was at the top of the village, she told him. We could visit and the gelongs (monks) were there, but we couldn't speak with them. So when we came to a fork, Indra asked if we wanted to climb up to the monastery to which I immediately said yes. However, there was a polite but loud cough from behind.

"Nick, should you not consult the rest of us?" enquired Ajahn Amaro. "We might not want to take a detour with an extra climb." Ah – it hadn't taken me long to get lost in that old 'walk leader' self again. But then Dhammarakkho responded with, "I want to see anything like that!" So we did climb the steeper path, but only after deciding in the correct, collective, way.

Muchu's monastery proved a very different affair to the previous one: past the last house was a simple, long, rough stone hut, with an uneven, corrugated iron roof and its door hanging open to emit the deep chant of Tibetan religious ceremony. Stooping to step inside we found half a dozen lay monks lined down one wall, all with long, glistening black hair, various rosaries about their person and clutching sacred bells in their hands as they chanted from loose-leaf pages. A large drum hung from a low beam, while cymbals, a conch shell and trumpet lay ready to use before them. Several other locals sat against the back and the other side wall, twirling prayer wheels, and at the front, sitting slightly higher, was an older lay monk with long grey hair leading the recital. Beyond him, the shrine, half obscured by large, wobbly butter offerings, was hard to discern in the low light created by the few flickering butter lamps. Room was made for us on the dirt floor, where our monks dutifully took up their meditation postures, but I soon slipped out to explore the adjacent building site.

This was the walls and roof of a new temple, a smaller version of the one at the monastery we'd just left. Inside, a group of young

women tended an open fire, frying round breads in a large wok filled with spitting oil. Seeing me, they offered tea and food.

Later, a young man summoned from the village below told me in English that their rinpoche would arrive from Kathmandu the next day, when they'd have their big ceremony, that their monks were doing a six-day silent fast with chanting, not three days, and that they were of the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. I asked who was building the temple. The villagers themselves, he told me, to replace an old one that had been in ruins, but another village had provided the craftsmen who were doing the wood carving. There's a smiling group photograph of us with the young women, the lay folk from the temple and the young man. But of course not the lay monks, who just kept chanting. We departed down the hill's other side full of tea and bonhomie, me carrying a large bag of tsampa, the ground, roasted-barley which is Tibet's staple food, given for our monks.

The chanting died away as we descended, passing broken beer bottles lying amidst nettles and the remains of a dead puppy with a dried grimace to its face – it felt a wilder country now. We regained the main track just before a police check post where our papers were inspected. Beyond that the track crossed the vibrant, green barley fields of the village and then wound up the far valley side.

We were now in the rain shadow of the mountains we'd been passing through; the valley slopes had none of the previous verdant forest. Instead they seemed raw and ravaged: orange to ochre coloured and dotted with grey bushes and dark-brown bedrock. In a few places, remnants of high-altitude pine woodland clung to the steepest slopes or sheltered in gullies, the trees more squat than those lower down the valley. Elsewhere only the carcasses of a few pines remained, hacked and burnt, along with an occasional ancient gnarled and twisted juniper. It was much like the Atlas Mountains in Morocco and for the same reason: low rainfall plus grazing. Because the productivity is so low, the grazing animals are few, so it's easy to think such habitat is natural. In the valley ahead I could make out only one herd – so high on

the opposite side they appeared as black dots. Maybe yaks but more likely dzo, the yak cow hybrid. Previously this upper valley would have been clothed in pine woodland which was then cut and carried on yaks into Tibet where timber is at a premium.

It must be a bleak land to farm. The only fields were the occasional small, bright-green patches in the valley bottom irrigated by the river. At this altitude they could produce only one poor crop of barley a year. It would be the animals which provided most of the diet.

There were several places where the steep valley sides had slipped, creating lighter-coloured rents in the mountain fabric. Our path had regularly crossed such landslides since we left Simikot: some were new, others old enough to be partially re-vegetated. Such action is natural, caused by the river slowly cutting into the valley, but with deforestation they have become much more frequent, further depleting the natural resources.

We were now much closer to the snow. The tops of the ridges, either side and ahead, were all crested white. As we came level to a side valley we could see white Himalayan giants towering beyond the ridges, glaciers on their sides. There was little wildlife – an occasional eagle or vulture circling far off. Plus the red-and-white helicopter flying above us, up or down the valley, with its load of portly Indians.

Rory was recovering now. The two of us were still behind, me carrying his camera, water and other needs as he swung along on his two sticks. His pain had eased and I had trouble keeping up, particularly on the climbs. The higher we got the more difficult I was finding climbing.

It was Anne Dew who had struggled on Ajahn Sumedho's walk up this valley, she'd told me. "I'd been sick from the beginning. I caught Alison's flu. So by the time we started walking she was over it but I had a fever. I remember Andrew saying in Kathmandu that it was up to me: I could stay behind or I could go with them, but they couldn't wait. I found the flight to Simikot hard. I threw up when we landed and was really woozy for the first few days. By the time we got to the monastery the worst was over, but then the

next day the altitude started to kick in. It was really ironic as I was supposed to be the doctor, there particularly for Ajahn Sumedho, but he was fine, better than many of us. He'd share his spirulina drink with me."

Alison told me that despite this, Anne was still insisting on carrying her pack. "We were trying to persuade her to give it over to one of the porters like I did. She would sometimes give in, but often she would say, 'No, no, I can do it'. It was really hard to watch. She was suffering so unnecessarily. She should have gone back, really." Andrew said he'd actually suggested that at the monastery in Yalbang, but by then Anne thought she was over the flu.

Andrew also told me that Michael, like Alison and Ajahn Sumedho, was not carrying his gear – it just looked like he was. "I picked up his pack one day and it was as light as a friggin' feather. He'd scurried all his stuff away in his tent bag given to the porters. When I asked, he said he'd got the heavy camera and all the film. But the camera was round his neck." Andrew told me this as I struggled to keep up with him as we walked a route over the Lake District mountains that he usually ran. So I felt sympathy for Michael, who would have been in his early fifties when they climbed up through Humla.

Although I was glad I wasn't carrying my gear, I still got the occasional pang of guilt watching the porters lumbering along ahead. But they didn't seem to be struggling: they often walked together, leant forward with the weight, chatting. Indra told us by local standards their loads were easy, as our packs were much lighter than most trekkers brought. Still, I noted each porter regularly checked the weight of the others' loads to make sure he wasn't carrying extra. Their names were Peri, Bhala and Ghai but early on, Dhammarakkho had re-named them: "Geri's the one who's always singing, Bill has the round Nepali hat and Ozzy is the little guy who's the leader."

Having bypassed the climb to the second monastery, the three of them were now distant figures on the track ahead, opposite the black scar I'd been watching since we left Muchu. I still couldn't

quite believe this was where the Karnali came from, as shown on my map, as the main valley itself seemed to continue straight ahead unaffected. However, as we got nearer there became no question: the main body of water was exiting from a black chasm, while the main valley beyond it had a tributary no larger than one coming in from the other side to the chasm. The chasm was the gorge cut by the river through the final and highest Himalayan ridge, and this was why our route followed the valley ahead, ascending and crossing the Nara-La pass, from where we would drop steeply back down to the Karnali River as it entered the gorge from Tibet.

"At a certain point the will doesn't work and he was compelled to surrender. The difficulties of walking through Mother India had done its work." Chris had asked Ajahn Amaro the purpose of pilgrimage and Ajahn Amaro was using Ajahn Sucitto's walking pilgrimage with me in India as an illustration of how the pilgrim is confronted with lessons they need to learn. "Before that pilgrimage, when Sucitto decided something, you just got out of the way, or used some skilful means to re-direct that wilfulness. It wasn't that he was really pushy, but it was like water flowing: if it was going to go, it was going to go. After the pilgrimage he was adaptable, more feminine, and much easier to live with. I should know: I was living and working with him right through those years." But Chris hadn't quite got it yet.

"Like Sujata giving milk rice to the Buddha?" Chris's view of the spiritual journey could be surprisingly romantic.

"No, more like being put through a meat grinder. So painful, he was forced to change. He became far more flexible; there was that capacity to surrender. He appreciated the change so much himself it became a major part of his practice and teaching." For me, that pilgrimage had a similarly profound effect: it was the hardest thing I'd ever done, I told them. I was humbled by my inadequacy and, according to other people, became a much nicer person after it. I'd suffered from too much confidence and positivity. "Whatever we

are dealing with – whether greed, anxiety, despair or self-doubt – they may give different lessons but the process is always the same," explained Ajahn Amaro. We only let go of difficult aspects of ourselves through thoroughly experiencing the suffering they cause in a situation where we can make the connection. That's what pilgrimage can provide.

We'd have conversations like this in the evening, gathered in the house where we were camping, drinking tea, taking turns at pumping water through the filter for drinking the next day, before dispersing to our tents. That pump was a godsend. A major aspect of the difficulty of that earlier pilgrimage was the regular bouts of dysentery Ajahn Sucitto and I suffered, particularly once we were in the mountains. Mountain people have no tradition of wells for water, instead they use a 'clean' side stream. But as the population increases that no longer works. We were reminded of that the next morning: Indra told us that one of the porters, Bill/Bhala, had bad dysentery. It had started at Yalbang and had still not cleared up. Bill sat there looking sad. Now he wanted to go home with the money he'd earned so far. His load, Indra told us, would be carried instead by our host, to the next stop where we would hire another porter to take the load over the pass. Our host, meanwhile, was preparing to leave. Her name was Serin Lama. All these people had Lama as their last name, indicating they were Buddhist.

We'd stopped the previous afternoon in a hamlet where the two valleys and the gorge met, on a small flat plain amidst the piles of sand and rock deposited by ancient glaciers and since reworked into ridges by the river. We'd chosen to stay at Serin Lama's house because it had empty fields beside the river for camping but we soon realised the best aspect of the choice was what we were able to do for our host. Serin Lama was a widow who'd lost her husband two years before. A hardy woman in worn blue jeans, sneakers and a waisted green frilly top with a necklace of white-and-red stones, she was delighted at the opportunity to receive us. She lived there alone, she told Indra when we asked. All her three sons were now young novices at the Yalbang monastery, while her daughter was living with her sister and attending the school. Hers

must have been a hard and lonely life. Only one of her fields was sown with barley, the other two lay fallow, and although she had a few animals in the shed next to her small house, her larger barn had been abandoned. The roof was starting to cave in and the flat area in front was covered in tall weeds, many supporting yellow daisy flowers with deep brown centres. But with us there, nothing was too much bother. She went to neighbours to round up supplies, tidied the small building where we ate and the porters and Indra slept, and offered tea and food over and again. Now she was keen to carry the load. We were her first opportunity that year to earn any money. What else could we do but agree.

It was a long hard climb the next morning, the first of two that would get us up to the pass. Serin Lama seemed determined to show the other two porters she was as good as them. Being of Tibetan stock she was of larger build and more adapted to the altitude. So it was she who arrived first at the top of each section of climb to sit there, not even out of breath, as the rest of us laboured up to join her.

Initially the track ran beside the small river, where two recent landslides meant that we had to climb a narrow path up and across steep slopes of loose crumbling soil, in constant danger of slipping into the river cutting into their base. We crossed a wooden bridge to the other shore. From there, the others climbed straight up following a shortcut, but Rory and I took the longer route as we'd spotted that it passed the lip of a cliff from where we could look into the chasm. We put down our packs and crept to the edge. The gorge was only some thirty metres wide where the river surged out beneath us, the silt-laden water in a rolling boil, and the walls rising close to vertical way above us. A slight path led along the cliff wall on our side, into the gloom. We wondered where it might lead, but neither of us dared take even one step along it to find out.

When we set off again the others were climbing the long slope ahead. Rory, now limping only slightly, was able to gain on them, but despite trying to do the same, I dropped steadily further behind. The incline wasn't that steep, less than one in three, but I

only had the one low gear and had to stop every five minutes to regain breath, my head swimming with the effort and my legs like jelly.

Once, I'd been so good at this. As a walk leader in Northumberland I was known for the nonchalance with which I led large walking groups, letting them string out on the trail, rather than keeping them bunched together. I was able to do that because I knew I could overtake them on the climbs. On mountain treks I always carried a larger pack with all the extra things the group might need. On the walk in the Pyrenees with Ajahn Sumedho I remember a climb from a French village which rose straight up for several hours to a long, high ridge that we'd be able to follow for days. I climbed it with three days' food for three people on my back plus my own things while Sucitto carried Ajahn Sumedho's tent and other heavy items. I was like a heavy-goods vehicle in bottom gear, but I made it.

I'd chosen that route because the long ridge would be an easy walk for Ajahn Sumedho in the tired state he was in. The top was covered in short alpine turf, with the occasional small outcrop of rocks, undulating but with no real climbing and views each side across the Pyrenean foothills. We could just stroll along for the rest of that day. However, a few hours later, a mountain thunderstorm gathered over the main peaks ahead of us and started to roll our way, with rumbling thunder claps and lightning forking down to the land below. It brought tremors to my mind. I'd woken up two nights before from a dream in which Ajahn Sumedho had been killed by lightning because I'd left him behind. There was no way down from the ridge, the sides were far too steep. The only small path shown on my map was still some way ahead.

Ajahn Sumedho had only one speed. I'd hurry up, but then he'd be left behind and I'd recall my dream. To make it worse, both monks carried metal walking poles. As the storm got closer, heading straight our way, I got increasingly agitated. Eventually I turned to Sucitto by my side.

"This is really dangerous. We're not going to make the side

path in time. What we should do is get rid of the metal poles and lie down. But making Ajahn Sumedho lie in the rain… . ."

"You don't have enough faith, Nick. Ajahn Sumedho's never going to die in a thunderstorm."

So we went on, lightning starting to crash down around us, the first of the rain coming heavy and hard. I was shaking so hard with anxiety I could no longer speak. Then, at last, we reached the path. We scrambled down it to a small alpine hut, door open, and in a trice we were inside with the rain beating on the roof.

Once I'd recovered I explained to Ajahn Sumedho why I'd been in such a state and what Sucitto had said.

"Huh", he replied. "If you'd told me that I would have lain down!" I'd forgotten how unconcerned Sucitto could be about death.

But those days were over; how can you lead walks from the back? Two years before, a couple of younger monks, one of them Appamado, asked me to lead a walk following the St. Paul's Way through the mountains of Turkey. I'd reluctantly agreed but found on the long climbs I couldn't keep up with the others. It was not for lack of fitness – I'd trained in the Irish mountains and we had walked for three weeks in Turkey, easily long enough for anyone to get fully fit. But I still struggled to keep up whenever we climbed, remembering my mother telling me when she got to sixty. "I still love walking, Nick, but I can't do hills." Age, I reckoned with, had brought the same lesson to me.

There was a day in Turkey when I asked the two monks to lead instead. One group of lay people had just left us and we were to meet another the next day. Having shed the responsibility, suddenly I felt really tired. But the monks kept losing their way, and in the afternoon, frustrated, they asked me to take over again. Still tired but trying to map read, I tripped on a steep rocky descent and cut my head badly. Then, sitting at the root of a small tree, my head now bandaged with a bloody white cloth, and having agreed to go back to the town to get it stitched up, I asked them to witness my vow: I would never, ever, lead a walk again.

So now here I was in Nepal climbing another steep stony, track,

on my own at the back again. But at least, thanks to that vow, I was not feeling responsible for anyone this time. This was the third climb that morning and the steepest. On one stop to regain my breath a Tibetan lady my age passed, carrying a heavy pack, wearing rough trousers and descending using an umbrella as a walking stick. I managed to nod a greeting, but I was feeling so weak, I could hardly string a thought together. All I could do was put one foot above and beyond the other, climbing slowly, stopping again and again to recover, staring blankly upwards at just how far there was still to go. Way above, I could see prayer flags fluttering and a pile of stones, but there was no sign of the others.

At the top I found only Rory waiting. He thought the others had gone on to a tea shop. We found them twenty minutes along the track, standing about a white Chinese jeep parked outside a solitary house along with a herd of dzo with large horns, which were sitting chewing the cud. Indra was excited.

"Nick, Nick. New plan. This jeep take us to Sip Sip. All together. Then we can climb down to Hilsa for night. No need for camping. What you say?" The others stood there expectantly. But I was disappointed. I might have been struggling, but we were now amidst the alpine meadows with the first flowers showing their heads. It was up here that we might also see interesting wildlife, particularly if we camped. I stood there and felt sad. "Do we have to? Isn't there some way to camp and go over in the morning?" The night before, Indra had told us his problem. The locals had yet to take their grazing animals up to Sip Sip, so there was no hut for him and the porters to sleep in and no way of cooking our meals. But bless him, he now got to talking to the two waiting locals again. After a lot of discussion he announced.

"This man and his brother can carry food, cooking pot and blankets up to hut just below Sip Sip. There we can camp." It proved a good choice: we'd now completed the first series of climbs and from there the new road contoured along the valley side. It was stony and rutted but made pleasant walking. In an old jeep crammed with all of us, including porters and luggage, it

would have been hell.

We had our meal at a road camp, where earth-moving machines making the new road were still parked from the winter, in a tea house stacked with boxed supplies. The small shrine was on a shelf above one filled with bottles of beer and Fanta. Beside it, the Buddhist scriptures wrapped in crimson silk had been respectfully placed on three neatly-spaced cans of Coca-Cola. Serin Lama bought a paper bag of oranges with her hard-earned cash, waved good-bye and set off back down the valley, cradling her purchase.

The air was now cool and we were above the tree line. That afternoon we enjoyed strolling along, gazing out at a wider rolling valley of stony green pasture rising up to mountain ridges. The pasture was a mix of rough grassland and low spiny shrubs, some coming into flower, their coarse exterior partially adorned with a covering of yellow pea flowers. We passed a herd of yaks nibbling delicately on some of those shrubs, with Alpine choughs on the ground nearby, no doubt feeding in turn on the insects in their dung. We'd been seeing the choughs regularly since the last camp, in ones and twos, their ringing call echoing off the valley sides. The red-and-white helicopter passed, here flying level with us, then rising ahead to disappear over the pass at the top of one of two valleys. Where the two valleys parted was the last small village: Yari. One brother headed down for the night's supplies while the other walked on, now carrying both packs that Serin Lama had been carrying.

And so, in the late afternoon, the floor of the valley rose steadily until it met the level road, the pleasant stroll ended and we started on the final climb to the hut. But this time I did it with Rory, the two of us stopping every ten yards or so to bend down and examine another new alpine plant. There were tiny shrubs dotted with pea flowers, cushion plants studded with pink stars, and in the wet flushes, minute primroses and an alpine butterwort, the flowers white with orange centres. We arrived long after the others had their tents erected, but without the struggle I'd been anticipating. Being a botanist can help like that sometimes.

For Anne, though, walking with Ajahn Sumedho, this had been the toughest of the climbs. "By Sip Sip, the campsite under the pass, my pulse was 150 at rest, I was waking up at night breathless, and every time I stood up I thought I was going to faint. With each step I thought I would vomit, but I kept going, doing just a dozen steps at a time. We had a Gamow bag, which is an inflatable chamber to put people in who are suffering from altitude sickness and blow up the pressure. But then they have to go down, otherwise they can die from fluid on the lungs. Being the doctor on the trip, I knew if I used it, then I wouldn't be able to go on to see Mount Kailash after Hilsa, so even though I felt really faint I was not going to give in. It was just amazing what I put myself through."

Alison told me, "We were all just focused on getting up the climbs by then so we didn't really notice quite how bad Anne was. In the evenings she could be all right."

"And Ajahn Sumedho, how was he doing?"

"He found those climbs hard, but for his age he was doing really well, and everyone else was fine. And the feeling within the group was very pleasant. At Sip Sip, there was also the policeman."

"Policeman?"

"Yes, we collected him from the police post at Yari. He was a real problem. Indian, well I mean Nepali, but from the plains. I think he slept with the porters. He had to stay with us and he wasn't happy about it."

"What, into Tibet?"

"Yes, with a gun and a little thermos flask."

I was suffering many of Anne's symptoms. At the hut I was wide awake all night long. Some of it I spent sitting up meditating in my tent, and occasionally I'd go outside and gaze up at the stars in the cold black sky and the mountain tops glimmering white. But much of the night, I just lay there.

Next day it was a short climb up to Sip Sip where the valley widened out to create a flat meadow. On the far side a steep turf slope dotted with rocks and boulders rose to the Nara-La pass,

clouds scudding by in the blue sky beyond it. The track widened for this final assault but had deep gullies from the winter's melting snow and beside it the rusting remains of a few old Chinese vehicles, presumably abandoned when the snow came at the end of the season. There were still patches of white on the hillside about us, but there was no snow left on the track itself. However, it was the far side, facing north, that would be difficult.

I arrived at the base of the climb not long after the others but was soon dropping way behind. Like Anne, I had to keep stopping, my chest heaving. Standing, gazing up to the top, I wondered why I was I labouring like this. Surely, it couldn't just be age? Ajahn Amaro was only a few years younger and there he was above me, climbing slowly but steadily, and Dhammarakkho was a year older and he was out of sight. I think it was on the third or fourth stop, my legs now getting very wobbly, that I remembered. Four years before I'd damaged my lungs with dust when converting our barn to make a meditation space. The doctor reassured me that it would pass: one exposure, even if there was grey asbestos in that roof, wouldn't do permanent damage, and sure enough the pain had gone in a few months. But I'd remained slightly wheezy – I'd simply got used to it. I realised, standing there, gazing forlornly up at the pass, that this must be the reason. That was why I had so much trouble in Turkey. Why I was now so slow climbing in the mountains. I'd damaged my lungs. Not enough to notice in Ireland but at altitude, where I needed all the lung capacity I had, it became more than obvious.

When I eventually toiled up to the top with its pyramid of stones and fluttering prayer flags, everyone – my companions and the porters – were sitting there in silence gazing into Tibet, taking in a very different land. Everything not white was ochre, brown or off-mauve. Western Tibet is a high-altitude desert. The little precipitation falls mostly as snow on the mountains.

The slope on the far side was extremely steep, dropping down to the distant river, mostly as one long scree field. Both the old path and the new track managed the descent by contouring around the slope, disappearing in and out of folds in the scree.

There were large snow fields, several covering the track, but all had been traversed previously and were crossed by a line of deep footprints. As long as we were cautious, there should be no problem.

The ridge and its north face, beside the descending path, was covered in low heath with tiny rhododendrons, purple and pale yellow, and a cassiope, a kind of heather, with delicate hanging white bells, and other plants. Rory and I had to tear ourselves away to follow the others walking carefully across the snow.

Once past the worst snow fields, the walking down was enjoyable. The track went down steadily but not steeply, winding in and out so that our companions appeared and disappeared ahead, with western Tibet beyond them. Everything here was much drier. Mostly it was bare scree but even where there was a stable surface, little grew.

As we took the curve of the valley the view started to open out and we could see the wide light-brown Tibetan plain in the distance for the first time, with white-topped mountains beyond. The mountains looked low, but that was only because the Tibetan plain is so high. Then Hilsa came into view below us, a huddle of flat-roofed houses, a suspension bridge over the river and the Chinese border buildings on the other side, with a tarmac road leading north. The helicopter came clattering over the Nara-La pass above and flew steeply down to a landing area beyond the houses.

I realised it must have been from here that Ajahn Sumedho's party saw the Chinese border guards leaving. "Yeah", Andrew Yeats had told me. "We couldn't believe it! We'd been worrying about the monks getting into Tibet the whole way up through Humla. Or we had, anyway; Ajahn Sumedho didn't seem to mind. Then when we got that first view they were packing up! It was the end of their season. We'd come over the pass so late in the year. By the time we got to the bottom they'd driven away and there were just our land cruisers and a truck waiting for us on the other side of the river. So there was no problem with the monks getting into Tibet. We were so happy."

When Ajahn Sumedho came this way there was just a suspension bridge at Hilsa, crossing the river into Tibet. Now there was a proper Chinese border post on the far side facing a small urban sprawl in Nepal: a few dozen rough houses, with piles of dirt and rubbish scattered everywhere. A child was shitting yellow diarrhoea in the middle of the main street when I arrived. At least there were two teahouses, sophisticated to us: there was actually a choice of food and drink. Rory was relieved – he'd been struggling to eat the rice and lentils ever since he forced it down while feeling sick. Instead there was fried bread and eggs for omelettes. Dhammarakkho ordered four.

We bought two rounds of Cokes for the porters to have with their food. They opted for the same dhal bhat we'd been eating for most of the journey. Then Indra translated a speech from Chris about how good they'd been. Reliable, honest, hard-working and helpful – one of them returning twice to collect things we'd left at a campsite. They looked shyly pleased as Chris gave each an extra day's pay. Once they'd gone, he gave a handsome tip to Indra who'd been a wonderful guide.

During the meal a pair of land cruisers arrived on the river's far side, but no Tibetan guide came to collect us, as Indra had predicted. When the land cruisers drove off again with the Indians from the helicopter Indra phoned Roger in Kathmandu who with Germanic certainty said our transport should be there by now, no question, as he'd insisted they arrive in the local Tibetan town the day before. He would phone the agency in Lhasa.

While we waited, Chris mentioned casually that he wouldn't be joining us for the visit to the Western Kingdoms. Instead he'd camp beside Lake Manasarovar and wait for our return to do the Kailash kora. This, he felt, was the right thing to do on a pilgrimage: there he could spend the time doing meditation by the lake. We'd decided back in England to follow Roger's advice and make the Western Kingdoms trip first, to give our bodies time to acclimatise to altitude before climbing higher. Chris had been outvoted.

My heart sank as he told us his plan, but it was Indra who

replied. "No, this is not possible. In Tibet, you all together, and with guide. Chinese insist." Chris looked devastated. Then he tried to persuade each of us in turn but no one was for changing. It was one of those moments. The group dynamic meant he'd have to let go of what he wanted.

In Kathmandu, Roger had also managed to persuade the monks they had to cross into Tibet with their robes hidden. Others had previously said the same, but Ajahn Amaro had simply dismissed the possibility and so I'd agreed quietly with the other laymen that if they were turned back, then we'd all return. But Roger was insistent. "You can do this. It is not against any rule. You simply have to cover the orange for the border. This is what all Tibetan monks have to do. This is skilful means. Non-contention. The Buddha would do the same." And so on. On our second meeting the monks gave in, but only for the crossing – Theravada is the conservative school of Buddhism where such behaviour is frowned upon.

In Yalbang Rinpoche was pleased at their decision. He told us that when coming from China or flying into Lhasa the Chinese now let monks in, but still not at this border. He also told us to hide anything Buddhist. In the tea shop I took off the small Buddha round my neck and hid the CDs and booklets he'd given me for a disciple of his we would be meeting.

By now another two land cruisers had appeared at the Chinese buildings on the river's far side and Indra suggested we should cross in case the guide was waiting there. So we trudged down the street, carrying our packs, past a row of golden Tibetan prayer wheels and a Nepali policewoman looking bored inside her sentry box. We crossed the swaying bridge – both railings hung with carpets, blankets and clothes drying. On the far side a dirt track led a few hundred metres beside the river to double gates in a high fence topped with barbed wire. The gates were open and the fence only ran from the river less than fifty metres up the mountainside, but it was obvious that it was here that China began. A pristine tarmac road led from the gates to the newly built border post and then continued out of sight. But our guide wasn't in the building

and the land cruisers weren't for us. A border guard insisted in clipped Chinese English, "You must go back. Entry only with guide." So we had to trudge back again.

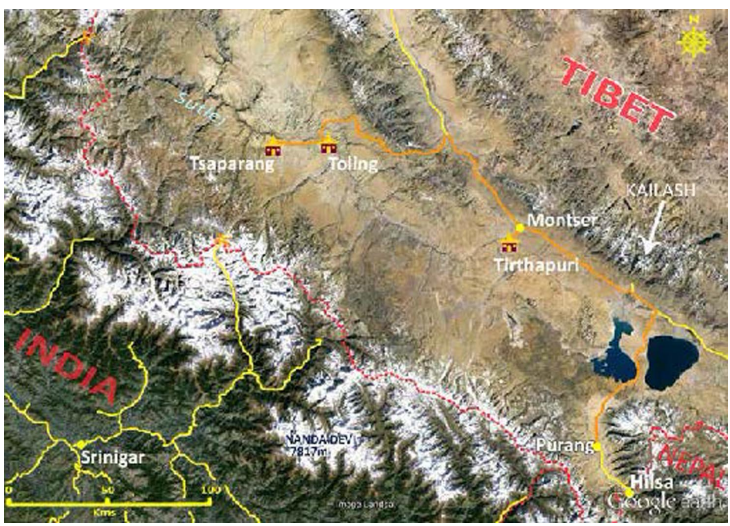
Our transport finally arrived as we trailed back across the bridge. Not for us two land cruisers and a truck to carry the luggage, as Ajahn Sumedho's group had enjoyed. A small Chinese mini-bus covered in dust drove up to the gates and a young wiry Tibetan, wearing jeans, a black leather jacket and dark glasses got out to saunter over to meet us. His name, he told us in good English with an American twang, was Dorje. They were late because of trouble with the mini-bus. It was old and not really up for the journey from Lhasa.

The Chinese border post proved no problem for our disguised monks. We were through in less than an hour. From there we drove on to Purang, the border town (which the Nepalis call Thilarikot, as they once owned it). Dorje and the driver sat in front. In the back of the mini bus there were more than enough seats for the six of us but they were small with little leg room, the windows set too low for the tallest of us to see out fully, and our packs took much of the spare space. It was going to be a cramped and unpleasant journey.

The near-perfect and empty road skirted a Tibetan village with what looked like the remains of a monastery at its base. Anne's photos included pictures of Ajahn Sumedho wandering through houses set on a hillside like that. Dorje said the village was called Zher and the monastery was 'gone'.

At the immigration buildings in Purang they must have expected only the Indians in land cruisers that day. An official trotted across a yard doing up his jacket to invite us into an empty office where he offered us plastic cups of hot water and insisted we use the comfortable chairs, some of them in front of computers (mine was on) while we waited. There, Appamado, who'd felt slightly sick for days, only just passed a Chinese body scan test meant to exclude infectious diseases. In the town, Rory tried to withdraw Chinese money but the banks and their machines didn't take Western cards.

Feeling washed up and poor we arrived at our Chinese hotel: a standard municipal block with three floors looking out onto the main street where military trucks and jeeps passed back and forth and every shop was Chinese. The hotel was just like those I'd seen in China: above the reception desk were the same half-dozen clocks showing the time in different places in the world and beside it the same armchairs with bored Chinese staff. I shared a room with Rory. Most of the night it was flooded with the sound of a karaoke session, as Chinese men tried to sing along to Western pop songs so badly I could only make out the occasional word. Not that it made much difference. I spent that night throwing up regularly in the toilet. The raking spasms of retching continued long after I had nothing left to give. I didn't sleep a wink. I had altitude sickness with a vengeance. Welcome to Tibet.



6Dealing with Disappointment

In 1997 I drove a mini-bus, packed with monks and nuns, to collect Ajahn Sumedho from Heathrow Airport on his return from Mount Kailash. I had to wait expectantly in the car park with the bus. Then when Ajahn Sumedho clambered into the front seat beside me, I turned and as casually as I could asked, "So, how'd it go?"

"I didn't get there," he answered grumpily.

"What?"

"The Chinese threw me out." He didn't seem to want to say more, so I left him in peace for the journey back. I found out the rest by asking the lay people who went with him.

"At the government buildings in Purang, the town after the border," Andrew told me, "there were these really young Chinese soldiers, nineteen or twenty, just kids in green uniforms with hats too big for them. When I handed in the papers they were uncertain about the monks, so I asked through the guide if a little baksheesh might help and they nodded. I put three hundred dollars in one of the passports. After that, they did all the paper work, looked casually at our bags and we were through. So we were really happy.

"But then we were in the jeeps outside the hostel. Maybe we'd already decided to go on to Lake Manasarovar and get out of Purang – it was a really seedy town. Anyway, we were in the jeeps when the kid soldiers came chasing after us, down the street. They were in a blind panic and screaming in Chinese at us. They'd got cold feet, or maybe found out something. The guide tried talking to them, but they insisted the monks had to go straight back.

"Everyone agreed we couldn't offer them more money: it just wouldn't work, but when I said we'd have to go back, too, Michael wasn't having that. He said they'd paid to go to Kailash and I had to take them as they weren't going on their own! David then got really annoyed with him. So they were both angry, while Anne and Alison were crying and Sugato had his head down looking really gutted. But Ajahn Sumedho wasn't at all upset! He immediately saw it from the guards' point of view. They were petrified because they'd done something wrong. Maybe they'd get sent to a concentration camp. And he was so philosophical about it: if it wasn't meant to be, then so be it. It was him who solved our argument by saying, 'I've been given all these things to take to Mount Kailash so you can take them for me. I feel they should continue their journey. Lots of people have given them. Please take them on my behalf.' So that's what we did."

Anne recalled little of this detail, but then she also admitted she'd spent most of the time looking at the ground quietly praying and then crying. But she did remember Ajahn Sumedho handing over the things he was carrying. "He gave them to Andrew, and Andrew hugged him and burst into tears too. I was utterly shocked. I just couldn't believe it was happening and simply wanted to go back with him. I could see no reason to go on. We'd never discussed what to do if that happened. We'd all been so upbeat: How could it go wrong with Ajahn Sumedho there? So we had no plan and Andrew had to arrange things really quickly. He sent two of the Sherpas back with the monks, made sure they had all their equipment but then he forgot food. They only had a packet of cornflakes to climb the Nara-La pass and get back to Yalbang monastery. Ajahn Sumedho doesn't like cornflakes. He told me later he felt he deserved that because he'd promised himself to ask for nothing on the pilgrimage but then told Andrew he'd prefer not to have cornflakes for breakfast."

It was late afternoon by the time the others left Purang for Lake Manasarovar. Then they were delayed a couple more hours at a check post because the party's number now didn't tally with their papers. "So when we finally did set off it was getting dark," Anne

told me. "That was such a horrible drive in the desert. Feeling so low and driving into the black, not knowing where we were going. No tarmac, just the desert, lots of tracks and boulders in the headlights. Awful."

Alison and Michael were also upset by that drive, Anne told me. And as to the previous disagreement about whether to go on without Ajahn Sumedho, Anne pointed out that Michael's position was understandable. "He wasn't there for taking the monks to Mount Kailash. It was one of the big trips of his life and he wanted to experience everything, capture it and photo it. Have it. Nick Hodge wasn't on that trip because of Ajahn Sumedho either, just Andrew, me and David, but Nick wasn't a forceful character, more laid back, bit of a jokey sort of chap. And I think Alison was just staying out of it."

The reduced party arrived at Lake Manasarovar in the middle of the night, still upset. "It was a hellish journey and a mistake to do it at night," admitted Andrew, "but I just wanted to get out of there! Michael thought we shouldn't have started, so when we got to the guesthouse he got really angry with me. He wanted his stuff so he could sleep, but it was in the truck which hadn't arrived. So he blamed me, which was justified. But I was still upset about Ajahn Sumedho and thought Michael was just being selfish. And I must admit I was also thinking his stuff was only in the truck cos he'd given it to the porters to carry. So we had this raging argument. And I never argue! Then I even lifted my fist to thump him. I've never hit anyone in my life. Not even as a kid. There I was on a spiritual pilgrimage and I was just about to thump someone for the first time in my life! So I turned and walked away."

Everything had been going so well until Ajahn Sumedho was sent back. Then it fell apart.

The drive across the desert wasn't that pleasant for me either, fifteen years later, even though the road was now tarmacked and we drove it in day light. I was still nauseous, exhausted from the

night spent retching, and yearning to sleep but unable to. Every time I began to doze off, slumped against the window, I'd startle awake again as my body panicked at the lack of oxygen. I recall nothing else of the journey except dully realising we must be at the Gurla Pass and peering out to see, yes, there was Mount Kailash: the first view. This was the view that Lama Govinda described as "one of the most inspiring views of the earth, a view, indeed, which makes the beholder wonder whether it is of this world or a dreamlike vision of the next." Although Kailash did look spectacular standing alone amidst a wide, flat landscape, I hadn't got it in me to be transported as Lama Govinda described. I just felt blank as the others took photos and Ajahn Amaro gave us a little lecture on how Kailash and the smaller mountains round it had once been an island in the inland sea which was formed by India shunting into Asia. Govinda also claimed the pilgrim is so filled with peace that he is made "immune to all personal concerns, because, as in a dream, he feels one with his vision." My immunity was the inability to even formulate any concerns.

Our original plan had been to drive west on a route just north of the Himalayan range which had wonderful views and would take us though some remote and little visited villages, and to then return on the main tarmac road to Kailash, but our little mini-bus wouldn't have managed that, so we had to go both ways on the main road. Not that I cared now.

For a Tibetan temple, the shrine had little on it, only four or five seemingly random smallish statues: Guru Rinpoche, a couple of bodhisattvas, and an even smaller Buddha rupa with a framed thangka – a Tibetan religious painting used for teaching – propped up against the central bodhisattva. The shrine and the lower half of the statues were swaddled in layers of white silk khatas, the ceremonial scarves that Tibetans offer to anything at all religious. The scarves were thickest across their laps but also trailed to the ground in places and rose up and over the top of the painting's frame. The altar table set before the shrine had another random

collection, this time of different-sized brass dishes used for offering incense or holding butter lamps, one of which was alight. Our three monks bent down to kneel on the dusty floor, bowed three times to the shrine, then sat on their haunches in silence.

Our first Buddhist shrine inside Tibet had a powerful sense of stillness that enclosed us, which I managed to savour, even in my dull state. A resonance, perhaps, of how important a place this had once been, and for how long. But there was also a poignancy: these random collections in front of us had been assembled from the remnants of the old temple, the body of which, surrounding us, had little of its original elaborate decoration. Gone were the floor to ceiling murals, instead the walls were newly plastered. The stone floor seemed recent, too, and the wooden pillars and carved roof timbers had been repainted, while the traditional double-entrance doors, which are always carved and elaborately painted with protective guardian spirits, were modern and blank.

We'd been shown in by a man dressed partially as a monk, in a crimson robe and yellow shirt, but wearing worn blue jeans and sporting a moustache. He clicked at his rosary beads while our monks bowed and then, seeing they were staying a while, came forward, lit incense, which he placed in one of the brass receptacles, and shuffled quietly to the back. He was now sitting against the wall.

Amidst the silence I could hear the occasional distant rumble and clank of machinery, which came from the road we'd arrived on. It was so new we'd had to drive alongside the last part as it was having its final rolling. A lorry drove ahead of the roller dribbling water over the surface while Tibetan workers, with scarves covering their mouths, stood watching. The neat, new road came to an abrupt end before the monastery's old outer wall. The road working commenced again beyond the monastery compound and some of the monastery itself was being rebuilt – a new small accommodation block and a new entrance to this temple. The rest of the old buildings were still in ruins, mostly just weathered heaps of old bricks, through which had been marked the route of the new road. I asked Dorje, our guide, if there'd been a deal: paying

to restore the monastery if the road could pass through. He said it was best I didn't ask.

We'd been warned before we came how most of the monasteries had been deliberately destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, the large statues defaced and broken, anything of worth looted, and the monks forced to disrobe and return to lay life. Since then, the buildings had slowly crumbled away. But the actual experience was still both shocking and saddening.

When our mini-bus had pulled up, Dorje had wanted to check in to the nearby guesthouse, but Ajahn Amaro said that wouldn't do: they were monks and first they had to pay respects to the Buddha. Dorje, surprised but also impressed, led us on the small kora, the route of circumambulation around the monastery. The worn path headed up over a small bluff. The sharp wind blowing across the empty desert plain tore at the monks' robes so they had to hold them tightly against their sides. Tattered prayer flags flapped vigorously from taut strings that led from the bluff to the ground below. We passed rocks assembled to create crude stupas or long thick walls beside the path, most topped with twisted yak horns. I was struggling to keep up, so it was only when Dorje stopped at an outcrop of white chalk to explain how pilgrims collected this, that I remembered Roger's long litany of praise about this place: "Tirthapuri is very, very, precious, beautiful," he'd told us in his heavy Swiss accent. "It has these little white balls," presumably the chalk I was now looking at. "It has a kora with dying place, same like Kailash; it has sweet-and-sour earth, good for stomach disease; it has sindura, the red powder used in thangka painting, only found there. Many, many, sacred things. Most Westerners don't go there, but the Indians know. Very powerful pilgrimage place." Not that I had the ability to discern the rest as we went round – but it was still impressive, even to someone in my exhausted condition.

The monastery's temple was beyond the bluff, and faced out onto several large, dull-red, knobbly stalagmites, two or so metres high. I guessed they were natural sandstone tors, but it was difficult to be certain because of the veneration they had received.

Rocks were piled at their base, prayer flags strung from their tops and they were coated with daubs of paint. Dorje did start to explain that they were "natural Buddhas" but we were interrupted by a group of Tibetan pilgrims who were far more insistent than I was with their questions; they wanted to know about our monks. When Ajahn Amaro emerged from the temple they asked to be blessed by touching foreheads with him, which he did, and then asked to have the babies on the women's backs blessed, too.

The kora was completed by passing back under the bluff where two slight springs gave water. The first seepage was cold, the second oozed steaming hot water. A Coca-Cola can, cut in half to make a cup, lay beside the first. At the second a Tibetan women was collecting water and steam. "For curing eyes," explained Dorje.

In the guesthouse yard we found our mini-bus parked beside a splendid Tibetan marquee with swirling, brightly-coloured designs sown on the outside. Inside, rope beds were set either side of trestle tables. Presumably it had been erected recently for a pilgrimage party to eat in, but once inside we decided we wanted to sleep there – it was both roomier and cleaner than the rooms offered in the guesthouse. Dorje, the driver and the woman from the guesthouse were horrified: we would be too cold, there was no heating, no walls. But our down sleeping bags, too warm for much of the walk through Humla, would be excellent here. I felt so comfortable lying there, bathed in coloured light from the swirling patterns. I didn't want to move again.

Beyond the new road was another hot spring, the steaming water dammed to create a shallow pool for bathing. When the road building ceased for the night the others went over to stand barefoot in the warm water, the steam rising about them turning pink from the sunset's crimson glow. They said it was magical. But I lay on my rope bed exhausted and worried. How, if I had found that small kora so hard, was I ever going to manage the three-day kora round Mount Kailash!

The laypeople accompanying Ajahn Sumedho all managed the Mount Kailash pilgrimage, even Anne. She found the climb over the Dolma-La pass at the back side of Kailash easier than the previous one over the Nara-La pass, even though it was over a thousand metres higher. It was not as steep or as long a climb, she told me, and she was well over the flu and digestion problems she'd suffered in Humla, so somehow she'd managed it. The next day she was so tired that she could hardly walk in a straight line, but she'd been really happy as she thought the difficulties would now be over. But in that, she was very wrong.

Andrew had been keen to get back to Humla as quickly as they could. They did the Kailash kora in three days and drove the evening of the last day to Purang so they could sleep there and cross back into Nepal the next day. On the drive to the border they stopped to tour the remains of Khorzhak monastery, which had been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. Those were the ruins I had noticed near Zher village. Andrew planned to stop for an hour, cross the border and have an early lunch before starting out, to avoid carrying food while climbing. From the monastery they saw heavy cloud enveloping the pass, and rain lower down. Michael wanted to get on, but Andrew felt they should still give this time to honour what was the only monastic site they would see, particularly as it meant so much to David. When they got to the border, however, they could see the porters already climbing, along with the mule led by the cook, leaving them only the little food they were carrying themselves. They could also see why – it was now snowing heavily higher up. They decided to climb straight away and eat the little they had en route.

It was not long before they reached the snow. "Michael has photos," Alison told me. "In the first we're standing in the snow and smiling." But the novelty soon passed as it steadily got worse. They toiled slowly upwards, the head Sherpa and Andrew taking turns to make the footsteps. "Soon it was up to our thighs," Andrew told me, "and really hard going. The porters had been forced to go ahead because all they had were flip-flops and no real warm clothing. Then, because Anne and Alison were struggling,

we were dropping further and further behind while all the time the snow was falling heavily. I had to keep stopping to see how they were. I thought we were going to have to stretcher Alison down because her heart was missing beats."

Alison explained, "It is something I get when I'm exhausted and under stress, this terrible stabbing pain in my chest. I knew if I could just stop for a rest and eat something it would go, but we couldn't do either. All we had eaten were a few cold chapattis near the start. Anne gave me painkillers and I just kept going – but I was really slow and holding everyone back and the snow was getting so thick we couldn't see anything."

Anne was also finding it difficult. "My eyelashes kept freezing together. I was really tired and getting so hungry. After the chapatti each, all we had were two tiny boxes of Sun Maid raisins – we'd stop every half hour and each get one raisin. And we were still so far from the top. I thought I was going to die." Alison felt her mortality, too. "It felt so close. I remember saying to myself my final goodbyes and thinking 'OK there are worse places to die. I've been on pilgrimage, I was in the mountains, I've achieved something.' Everything was down to the absolute bare bones, life and death, left foot, right foot, pain, exhaustion, the deep snow and just waiting to see what happened. But also, somehow, I felt so close to the spiritual."

When it began to get dark, Andrew told them to put on their head torches. "But none of them worked, it was so cold," Anne told me. "So there was only Michael's hand torch flicking back and forth to show us where to go. The snow falling and us struggling up through the deep snow, with David doing his mantra behind me, and somehow we just kept going, keeping going. I don't know how we did it."

As they neared the top a young Sherpa appeared ahead. He'd come back to help them. He'd set off with the Nepalese policeman who'd then tried to stop him going back when the two of them reached the top, insisting it was pointless and they should save themselves. "It was good Trering came back," Andrew told me. "We needed him to look after the others. We had to keep shaking

them awake when we stopped. Without that, they would have died of hypothermia. It was the worst experience I've had in the mountains in thirty years of climbing. By the time we reached the top we'd been going for well over ten hours and it must have been near midnight. But we thought at least we were nearly there. The campsite we'd used five days before was just below with a hut the porters slept in, which we could all use, and there would be hot food. But when we got there it was just the walls with the inside filled with snow – the rest had been dismantled by the locals for the winter."

Anne remembers standing in deep snow, calling, and there being dead silence except for the wind. "There was nothing we could do but go on. Andrew said we'd not survive the night if we dug a snow hole as it was so cold. We'd already found our mule lying dead in the snow at the top, where the porters had left it. There was no path and we had no idea which was the right way. It was then that I thought we were really finished. But the head Sherpa, Ricshing, lived in that valley and he knew by looking at some big boulders which way to go, so we started down following him. If he hadn't been there we would have died. He was in front with the torch, going down and down on these steep, icy slopes. Eventually we found our cook sitting crumpled on a rock in the snow. We thought he was dead. We had to shake him awake. He was waiting there for us! He couldn't speak, he was so hypothermic; his torch had failed and he had no idea where he was. He would have died for sure. Amazing we found him. By that time we'd found the path so we got him up and walked down with him and then we came below the snow line and it was raining. That must have been another two hours' walking. When we arrived at the police checkpoint I can't tell you what it was like to have a cup of tea by a fire! We were so lucky to make it with just the mule dying. But, you know, I don't think Ajahn Sumedho would have survived." Andrew felt the same. "Ajahn Sumedho was over 60. Afterwards, I kept thinking how lucky it was he wasn't with us, and how maybe that was why."

In Kathmandu, Roger had spoken about the Kailash pilgrimage as "a place for facing our karmic load: the accumulated bad credits from previous lives." And he'd given examples of hellish things he and others had endured. But then the practical side of him had also predicted that some of us would suffer, as I did, simply because of the altitude. "That's why you go to Tirthapuri. The day before you enter Tibet you have the 800-metre rise over the pass, then you have another 800-metre rise to Lake Manasarovar. The body may strike! Safe is 4 to 500 metres at high altitudes, so two is double risky. Best you go back down to Tirthapuri to sleep, then down more to Toling, to let the body recover." Maybe our suffering was karmic, who knows, but for myself and Appamado, who now had a continuous migraine and was feeling increasingly nauseous, it definitely felt like our bodies had struck. He, like me, didn't want to make anything of it, so as not to put the others out, but whenever he spoke, the difficulty he had simply engaging was obvious. I hoped it would get better for both of us down at Toling.

Although I didn't sleep that night in the marquee, I did rest. I was getting used to the body's panic at the lack of oxygen as my breath slowed, but it still pulled me back into wakefulness each time. So I'd lie listening to the struggled breathing of my companions while trying to be mindful and accepting. In the night's middle hours some energy came and I stole out quietly into the blistering cold night to walk, clothed but also wrapped in my sleeping bag, beside the small river. This was the Sutlej, I'd realised, its source the two lakes at the base of Mount Kailash, and its destination the Punjab in northern India. It was flowing into a small gorge of which the bluff at the monastery was the start. The night was still and silent, the stars painfully sharp despite the half moon.

If we'd had land cruisers as we'd expected, the next day would have been spent continuing down the Sutlej Valley, passing occasional small communities which use the river water to eke out a living at this altitude, visiting the Bon monastery of Gurugyam, an ancient troglodyte city, and other remains of the Western kingdoms of Tibet. But the new tarmac stopped at Tirthapuri and

our mini-bus was no vehicle for a day on a dirt road. So instead we had to return and head west on Western Tibet's only tarmac road, which goes all the way to Kashgar in Inner Mongolia, crossing several passes. There is a turn off it onto a tarmac road that drops back into the Sutlej Valley.

Initially, the landscape was the same wide desert plain, with mountains in the distance. We passed a nowhere Tibetan town called Montser, there because of a big coal mine nearby, but after that the views became steadily more spectacular. The soft sediments of the inland sea, formed from the eroding Himalayas, have been cut into by the rivers flowing out through the Himalayan wall. The result looks incredibly complicated and is on an immense scale. Discrete layers, each one a sharply edged step, run up the side of gorges, cliffs, promontories and isolated hills; everything is made of these stepped layers. And there are such incredible colours: every hue of brown from deep mauve through reds to bright yellow. Ajahn Amaro reckoned it the most amazing landscape he'd ever seen. Rory, sitting next to me, was also deeply moved, though being Rory, he only mumbled. "Yes, it is." Both of them took innumerable photos all day long.

Everyone looked out of the windows utterly transfixed – except for me. I had enough vitality to appreciate how unusual it was, but not enough to feel much response. I dully tried to justify this obvious lack to myself. "It's desert with none of the beauty provided by life. That's what I'm moved by. And because it's alpine desert there's not even standing cacti." There was some truth in the justifications – I do get bored easily in cave tours and such, but really it was the mind state viewing it which was the problem. That same lethargic state also couldn't recognise quite how bad I was.

By now Dorje was showing increasing respect to the monks. In Purang I'd had to insist that Ajahn Amaro had the best seat by the driver. Dorje had responded then as he might with any group, a shrug that acknowledged we were paying. But things changed once they had taken off the jackets and hats and he could see they were monks. Now he started to question Ajahn Amaro.

"You can be a monk for a short time in Thailand?"

"Most men do it. Parents of girls expect any husband to have been a monk. They think it makes them responsible. And the government gives all civil servants three months off to be a monk."

"What! The government helps people to be monks!"

"Sure, they know it brings morality into society."

Dorje told us he'd thought of becoming a monk. He'd escaped from Tibet in his teens and been educated in Dharamsala where the Dalai Lama was based. That's where he'd learnt his English and why he spoke with the streetwise mid-Atlantic drawl he'd learnt from the foreigners there. I chipped in that Ajahn Amaro knew the Dalai Lama.

"Really!"

"I've met him many times," Ajahn Amaro added, "at conferences and meetings. He recognises me, he held my nose once and gave me a big hug."

Dorje told us how the Chinese put him in a re-education camp for six months when he returned. "Yeah, that was hard. Then I got this job because I speak English, but I have to be real careful." He certainly was careful. At each check post he'd warn us to put our cameras away and do nothing to upset the guards. Then he was always respectful talking to the Chinese police. In Purang he'd told us to stay indoors.

Later that afternoon our little mini-bus started the descent back into the Sutlej Valley, winding down through the layered cliffs, promontories and gorges, to where the river, having grown substantially, now wound its way across a wide river bed. Beyond it, on a slight cliff, was a small town amidst poplar trees, looking utterly incongruous in this empty, desert landscape. I wondered why it was there: the only signs of agriculture we passed were several large poly-tunnels, just before we crossed a set of long bridges over what was still a comparatively small river for the size of the river bed. Then we drove up and into the town, pulling up outside a Tibetan hostel, a two-storey building painted in gaudy Tibetan colours. Inside, before setting off to the military

compound to get our permits, Dorje gave us another lecture on being careful and not taking photos. Once he'd gone I went out to see if I could resolve the conundrum of why this town might be here.

The hostel faced an off-white wall some ten feet high which ran all the way to the town's main street, which was like the one in Purang. One side was lined with small shops in concrete blocks, a dozen or so to each block, all of them Chinese. The other side had another standard Chinese hotel, like the one in Purang, and government buildings: a big police station and an even bigger Chinese military barracks. The workers were all Tibetans, pulling carts that trundled by, carrying spades or brooms, unloading a lorry, and wearing clothes which were dirty and worn. All had some variety of hat on to shade the sun – cowboy hat, peaked cap, floppy sun hat, woven sombrero – and they often also had a scarf over their mouths against the dust. The few Chinese on the street wore neat uniforms or smart Western clothes. The few vehicles were either military green or tractors. This town, I realised, was here because of the border with India, just as Purang was. The border is still in dispute, so the Chinese are here in force. And that was why Dorje was particularly nervous.

At one end of the street was a large ancient stupa, painted Tibetan maroon and white. It stood next to the cliff edge, and was being circled by several Tibetans. I'd seen Tibetans doing this often in India, whirling hand-held prayer wheels, most of the women in their traditional colourful clothes. But here, inside Tibet, no one had a prayer wheel, and they were all in modern dress. A chap in a worn, black suit was on his mobile phone; a teenage girl in jeans and pink sweater was learning her Chinese vocabulary from a book, repeating the words over and over as she went round; and a mother holding a two-year-old was going slowly along the line of big copper prayer wheels facing onto the stupa, encouraging the child to turn each one. Off to one side, a group of young Chinese soldiers stood watching, taking photos of the scene and commenting to each other. Then they took photos of me as I joined the circling Tibetans.

Beside the stupa was a pristine new municipal park, laid out in orderly squares with paths, flower beds and lighting, and at one side, right beside the stupa, two marquees emitting Chinese pop songs. To the shrill sound of these I turned round the stupa, now with a view of the Chinese town, now the new park, then looking out across the empty Sutlej Valley to a wide and incredible landscape: the narrow river flowing through its much wider river bed, with the cliffs of layered sediment in the distance. Here it was all the colour of old bone. Then, as I came round further, there, beyond, were the white Himalayan peaks. And so back to the mundane: town, park, soldiers, shrill pop songs. Then out again into the emptiness. In the slightly disconnected state I was in, it all ran into each other as I trudged slowly round and round. Much as the Tibetan Buddhist teachings have it: samsara, nirvana. All the same.

Towards evening, after a much-needed rest, we got to see what lay beyond the old wall facing our guesthouse. After two visits to the military office in town, Dorje had the necessary permits. Beyond the wall was an ancient Buddhist monastery of single-storey buildings, the ones still in use coloured the off-white and dull deep red of the stupa, but in differing combinations. Much of the site was just ruins; buildings and stupas that had crumbled and were now returning to the earth from which they were made. We followed the janitor as Dorje explained that this was the famous Toling Monastery, and with a jolt I came out of my fog with a memory. Of course! This was one of the two sites Stephen Bachelor had been so keen to see.

"Buddhism was able to survive in Guge while being repressed in the rest of Tibet because the place was so remote," Stephen had told us. "Its capital city, Toling, being adjacent to India, then became one of the principal places for Buddhism's revival in the eleventh century. It was where Atisha first came to Tibet, and he's so important to the Tibetans, particularly the Gelug-pa, the tradition I was trained in. Many Tibetans would tell me the story of how the king of Guge, Yeshe-o, gave up his life to bring Atisha to Tibet. Although unlikely to be true, it's one of those stories

indicating how important an event this was. Supposedly the king was captured and ransomed for his weight in gold but told his people to use the money instead to invite and bring Atisha. But Guge must have been important and wealthy to sponsor someone like Atisha, the abbot of the famous Vikramshiva monastery in Bengal. That was during the Mughal invasions of India which led to the destruction of the monasteries there, so sponsoring Atisha would have been like sponsoring refugees in Germany wanting to flee Berlin: Jewish intellectuals, and so on, invited by Harvard or Yale."

Remembering that made me reassess what I was now looking at. Yes, this would have been a large and important monastery. Its style seemed much simpler than the famous multi-storeyed Tibetan monasteries I'd seen photos of, but then it would be, if it had been at the height of its importance much earlier. What I couldn't comprehend, however, was how a wealthy city could have been here to support it. Today, there was very little to the rest of the small town, and beyond was high-altitude desert.

We stopped in front of the largest temple building, all of its walls washed the dull maroon red with which the Tibetans paint anything religious. As an old monk unlocked the large wooden doors Dorje warned us we mustn't take photos. "Some guys from Kathmandu used photos to find buyers, then came back and stole the statues." Then we toured the gloomy interior following Dorje, the Tibetan monk and Ajahn Amaro, who had the most powerful torch. The old monk would point out a figure amidst the intricate murals on the walls, saying the name in Tibetan, and then, as the circle of light from Ajahn's torch settled on it, Ajahn or Dorje would give us the Sanskrit name. I was at the back so saw each image after they had moved on, by the feeble light of the torch on my mobile phone. The reduced vision suited my state, and anyway, I find religious symbolism, like these deities and bodhisattvas, a struggle to appreciate even when I'm bright.

What I did enjoy was wandering round the rest of the Toling site with Dhammarakkho. We explored old buildings, remains of buildings and stubs of stupas. Then, drawn by the sound of loud

chanting, we passed through a door to find seven old Tibetan women sitting on chairs around a giant, brass prayer wheel, which they turned as they chanted, the rumbling prayer wheel ringing a bell once every turn. When they saw us they stopped, calling out in delight while the prayer wheel rumbled to a halt. The voice of a monk, which they had been 'following', carried on, emanating from an old cassette recorder. But they wanted blessings; Dhammarakkho had to touch heads with each. As we moved on we heard them and the prayer wheel start up again, re-joining and drowning out the monk.

I returned alone to the big stupa. By then it was early evening, the low sun illuminating the scene. A group of lads wearing baseball caps now sauntered around it, on the dusty worn path along with a middle-aged man and several older people. As I joined them, two teenage girls arrived, wearing tight jeans, high heels and lots of make-up. The Chinese pop music seemed louder now and was accompanied by the murmur of voices. The marquees, I realised as I passed, contained a bar serving the Chinese. Some of them were gathered outside, many in uniform.

With the bar open the stupa didn't have the same atmosphere. So I only circled the stupa the obligatory three times, and then followed the cliff's edge, heading west, looking out at the wide valley with the sun starting to set. I was following a well-worn path which passed rows of crumbling small stupas, now little more than misshapen piles of earth. At the cliff's far end, where it swung back on itself to create a peninsula, there were complete stupas with lines of multi-coloured prayer flags radiating from the largest out to the top of the smaller ones or to wooden poles, all of which radiated further lines of prayer flags. It looked like a carnival site. Inside, with the prayer flags flapping above and around me, I could see paths delineated with small stones that meandered everywhere beneath the flags and around the poles and stupas, criss-crossing each other and passing innumerable small rock piles, often adorned with yak horns.

Everything here was made so crudely – clay, rough wood, rock, animal horn, a simple people's expression of piety – like sites I

knew from the west of Ireland. It was organic, feminine, and in such contrast to the brutal Chinese Communist town. The faded colours of the small tattered flags – there must have been a thousand of them flapping above and around me – were a statement against the greyness: the greyness of the desert, the greyness of the Communist regime.

Despite my state, or maybe because of it, with the sky above me now turning crimson, I was transfixed. Here was the heartfelt response I was not capable of when travelling in the mini-bus. I was inside a colour-filled kaleidoscope of religious piety. It was one of those moments when the veil is parted.

The following morning we set out early to visit the citadel of Tsaparang, which Dorje explained had replaced Toling as the capital of the small kingdom known as Guge. It was along the Sutlej Valley but further back from the river on a small tributary, and carved out of a promontory in the stepped, light ochre-grey valley sides. From a distance, the promontory looked different to the rest of the towering cliffs but not in colour, only in its crenellated nature. As we got closer, the crenellations resolved into the remnants of a thousand houses, caves and stupas, crowded onto its steep sides. At a modern entrance gate Dorje presented our permits and we climbed worn steps carved from the same ochre-grey earth used to make everything else. We passed two intact temples painted deep maroon-red; the only other building not in ruins was another square maroon-coloured box at the distant top which Dorje told us was the king's palace. We climbed upwards between the remains of earth walls towards the palace – or I should say the rest of the party did, as I was soon left behind. I could manage only a few steps before having to stop, breathless, to gaze at yet another light ochre-grey earth pile in front of me, the remains of some wall or stupa. So my experience of Tsaparang was different from that of my companions. I heard none of Dorje's explanation and didn't see into any of the buildings he showed the others; all I saw were the steps ahead, ascending at first between

house walls, then through a tunnel carved upwards through the soft rock, and then past fortifications. I climbed the whole way, willing myself on, but was still passed by the others coming down. At the top I slumped against a wall for the third time and remained there.

I was engulfed in despair. How was I ever going to manage the kora round Mount Kailash? I'd now had two days to recover and we'd descended to the Guge Kingdom. What would I be like circling Kailash starting a thousand metres higher? Then the pass, Dolma-La, was 5,700 metres – 18,700 feet! Surely I was never going to manage that.

As I sat there forlornly gazing out over the view, I also felt the poignancy of this citadel, now a crumbling pile of earth, which had once provided a fortified home for several thousand souls. Kings, courtiers, peasants, merchants, soldiers, all beavering away, taking their lives so seriously. What was the point when it crumbles away to this: just a giant pile of earth amidst a dry and bleak landscape. At one of my slumped stops on the way up I'd found I was sitting on a cache of tsa tsa, tiny clay offerings, less than the size of a thumb nail, made with a mould. They all represented the same figure and had emerged from the base of what must have been a votive space with a religious image, but now it was all just so much crumbling earth coloured the same light ochre-grey.

As I recovered from the climb, and my mind slowly brightened, I started to re-appraise my situation. From this vantage point I could see both up and down the wide Sutlej Valley and the view was stunning. Things weren't so bad; I just had to accept I couldn't keep up with the others. If, instead, I simply stayed within what I could manage, I might enjoy things. Maybe I could even do Mount Kailash that way. At least I could try – and not worry about the Dolma-La pass until I got there…

I got to pondering again about how such a large community had come to live here, where so few people lived now. In the whole wide valley, I could see just one farm, way off, down by the Sutlej River, with a few poplars standing about a single small dwelling. This valley was so inhospitable to life – dry most of the

year, freezing for half of it – so that Rory could find only a few plant species: a grass, a couple of small spiny shrubs and a little clematis-like climber. The shrubs were only now coming into leaf even though it was the first day of June. That made the growing season, when there was water, less than three months long. How could such a place justify a city?

In the mini-bus Dorje had mentioned that the road went on to a border post on a high pass, which was closed now except for local trade. Recalling that, I realised that Guge was on a trade route from India that came up the Sutlej Valley and then over the Himalayas, just as we had come up the Karnali Valley and over a pass where the river passed through a gorge. The existence of Toling, and later Tsaparang, must have been due solely to trade. From here the route could have crossed the high Tibetan desert plateau to Kashgar, on the Silk Route, where a right turn led to China, and left to Europe. And this would be the most direct route from the plains of India.

I have since read reports of caravans of hundreds of merchants transporting silk and pottery, and how the whole citadel was fed with fresh food grown two weeks' journey away. Tsaparang had been an ethnically diverse merchant city: the important resting place between the crossing of the Himalayan wall and the desert. This was why it was the first place in Tibet that any European is known to have visited. The Portuguese Jesuit Father Antonio de Andrade came here from Goa as a missionary in 1624, drawn to Tibet by reports of a Christian people on the other side of the Himalayas. The Portuguese believed then in the myth of the kingdom of Prester John and the lost Christians somewhere beyond the Muslim world. When Andrade got to Tsaparang he was convinced he'd found them. The monasticism he met was, he reported, a degenerate form of Christianity mixed with pagan beliefs but still retaining a trinity at its core.

Father Andrade's visit to Tsaparang was given a whole chapter in a book Stephen had recommended. I'd brought it with us, but we'd left it in Kathmandu with that part unread. It was the account of another Jesuit father's mission to Tibet, one hundred

years later. Old Tibetan texts say it was Andrade's Christian mission that led to the fall of Tsaparang, that the Ladakhi state to the west attacked them because of it. But I suspect that's just ancient spin put on the destruction, by Buddhist monks – Andrade had left by then, leaving a small Christian flock, and it seems more likely that these mountain states were regularly at war at that time, hence the construction of a fortified citadel to replace Toling, to protect their trade route wealth. But whatever the cause, the means is not in doubt. Unable to take the citadel, the Ladakhis brought in Mongol mercenaries who built a massive siege tower. The king, courtiers and generals surrendered to save the rest of the population and were immediately beheaded in full view of the town above. After that, Tsaparang was abandoned and never lived in again.

The stone base of the siege tower is still there, the dressed granite stones standing out amidst all that sediment – not that I saw it myself. I didn't manage the temples either on the way back, nor their exquisite murals which Stephen Batchelor had most wanted to see. I did look in but decided to keep to my new resolve of only doing as much as I could manage. I'd also had enough sadness for the day and couldn't cope with the destruction caused by the Cultural Revolution. One glance in at the battered statues, and the attempted repairs with crude daubs of clay, was enough. Instead I just wandered down to our mini-bus and waited for the others to finish.

That afternoon we saw more destruction wreaked by the Cultural Revolution. Back at Toling, after a lunch eaten under a few poplars beside the Sutlej River, we were shown round a complex of old buildings in the monastery behind the red temple. With the janitor leading, and Dorje translating, we were taken in turn to a series of doors, each of them leading off the same central space. Each door, when unlocked by the janitor, revealed a shrine to a different bodhisattva. We could tell which one only by reading the worn sign the janitor handed Dorje with the name in Tibetan, Chinese and English. On each room's back wall there was a raised outline – the aura that had originally surrounded the figure – but

of the statue, only a few pieces, found during the restoration, lay on the floor: an arm and a leg, or an arm and part of the head. One room just had the torso, split open with its straw stuffing spewed on the floor, another just the base with a seated lion either side. Before each set of remnants was a small pile of dusty bank note offerings.

That evening the Communist state had a go at us, too. We were out on the cliff, just Dhammarakkho, Appamado and myself. I'd shown them the big stupa and we were walking to the peninsula of fluttering prayer flags when three people came hurrying from behind. In the lead was an attractive young Chinese woman with straight black hair, incongruously dressed in a tight black dress with white swirls, so short you could see most of her black fishnet tights, glittery shoes with high heels and with a purse the shape of a heart dangling from her wrist. She appeared to have come from a night club. Trailing behind her was a middle-aged Tibetan in a rumpled suit and a uniformed policeman, also Tibetan. It was the young Chinese woman who spoke.

"Excuse me, I am police. But please excuse, I do not have identity card." We nodded. I could see the problem: where would she have put it? "We wish to see your papers and passports."

"They're in the hotel."

"You must take us there." So we all walked back, via the stupa, with the two Tibetans, both probably local police, trailing behind us. The policewomen apologised twice more for not having her identity card, but I suspect it was really embarrassment at the way she was dressed. She wobbled on her heels as we crossed the rough ground, and was looking increasingly cold, although still trying to remain stern. At the hostel Dorje produced our papers and sent everyone for their passports, indicating with his hand as we returned that we should sit down and keep quiet.

The policewoman's respectful tone had now gone. Instead she barked at Dorje in harsh Chinese, staring hard at each of the papers he produced. His replies seemed confident though. He was used to this, and knew everything was in order. Eventually she asked for our passports, which Dorje collected from us, again

indicating we should sit quietly as she carefully examined them. She asked us occasional questions to test they were our passports, then she nodded and gave them back. Next it was the turn of the hostel's large guest register. There she immediately spotted something wrong. Her Chinese, directed at the female Tibetan owner, now came out like bullets. She stabbed at the register, shouting at the woman. I started to say how kind they'd been, but Dorje immediately shut me up, whispering, "It's their problem. Not us. Stay out." But it was so painful to watch. The shouted, high-pitched questions were shrieked out one after the other. In reply to each the Tibetan owner just looked lost, shaking her bowed head, saying nothing while starting to cry. An older Tibetan man in the background, maybe her husband, was visibly in shock, but Dorje and the two Tibetan policemen looked on impassively.

Eventually the young policewoman turned and spoke to Dorje who told us we could go back to our rooms, everything was in order. But the inquisition of the hostel owner continued without us. As we left Dorje handed out our passports, saying quietly, "Not our problem. Police want to find something wrong." An hour later when Dhammarakkho went out to get fresh air, the hostel owner and husband were still being interrogated, but now in their office. He said the Tibetan woman was sobbing audibly.

We were in shock for the rest of that evening. We'd seen the brutal reality of occupation. It reminded me of the way the whites treated the blacks in South Africa during apartheid, and the Israelis the Palestinians. This young woman, dressed so prettily for her night out, had turned into a she-devil. But it wasn't her fault. It's the inevitable consequence of trying to rule a country where you are a much-resented minority. You have to act tough because of the fear. The fear is everywhere – in the oppressors as well as the oppressed.

It was that same fear that Ajahn Sumedho had spotted in the soldiers who'd thrown him out of Tibet: blind panic that they'd done something wrong. The Nepalese police on the other side of

the border weren't like that. Anne said they were really kind when the lay party reached their hut in the middle of the night after crossing the pass in the snow. "They gave us hot tea and food, and then, when our tent collapsed with the weight of the snow, they made space for us on the floor."

Crossing the pass was not the end of the lay party's difficulties, however. The following day, it was the melt water plus the rain falling at lower altitudes. All that water was now rushing down the valley, overflowing the river bed and turning every small tributary into a roaring torrent, making each one dangerous to cross. It had also caused landslides that had swept away the path.

Anne told me that Andrew was now pretty sick. "He had dysentery when we crossed the pass, but just kept pushing himself. The next day he really struggled and that night I remember plying him with pills and him having really high fevers. He was completely drenched in sweat. I had to give him my sleeping bag and try to treat him in the night. Everything was wet in the tent, everything. It was really miserable. I was sharing my tent with him by then. He'd taken me under his wing when we got to Tibet. He'd said it would be warmer, but he was also trying to keep an eye on me. But for the last two days it was him who was worse. He'd spent so much energy on the pass.

"Then next day was the rock fall, another near-death experience – for me anyway. We got to a place where the path was washed away. The track had gone and there was just this gap and a slight path across, with a precipice down to the river roaring beneath. Boulders were coming down, bouncing and falling into the river. We had to run across and try to avoid the boulders. There were spaces, ten seconds between the boulders. If one hit you, that would be it. Michael had been walking ahead and came back and said the path was closed and we'd have to find another way. Andrew replied, 'There isn't another way, Michael. We'll just have to run across.' So there was this argument, Michael wouldn't have it, this was absolutely insane, madness and he was trying to recruit people to do his thing. That was to climb down to the river and wade through the water. The Sherpas thought that was a

ludicrous idea – the river was in spate and they obviously knew more about it than him. Andrew was really tired so he just ran across and was shouting back 'run, run', and so everyone did, including Alison, and I ended up left with Michael. He was trying to stop me saying, 'You have to come with me. Don't, for God's sake, go across there!' and I just kind of froze! All these great boulders coming down: what to do? I made a hesitant start and a boulder came crashing down and Michael shouted at me to stop. So I stopped and then I froze completely, but right where the boulders were! Trering, the young guide, ran back, took my pack, took my hand and ran with me!"

"And Michael?"

"He came when there wasn't anyone left. I think he was just really scared and couldn't admit it, but I was still angry with him. I could have died!

"That next day we went down to Yalbang Gompa. We stayed there two nights, I think, to dry out our stuff. That first night, Alison, Michael and Nick Hodge were out around the fire drying things with the Sherpas, but me, Andrew and David spent the evening in with the monks recounting the trip. I remember how keen Ajahn Sumedho was to know about the kora and how we were. Sugato was really quiet, which was unlike him. I think he found it hard hearing what he'd missed. Really hard.

"But, Nick, the monks had it much better than us. They'd been given a room upstairs in the monastery's new temple which had the only good roof. Heavy rain like that was really unusual in the valley and all the old houses with the flat roofs had problems, even Rinpoche's house, but Ajahn Sumedho said they'd been really dry in their room, just sitting there meditating and looking out at the rain. Before that they'd spent a lot of time talking to Rinpoche and going for walks. He'd really enjoyed his stay."

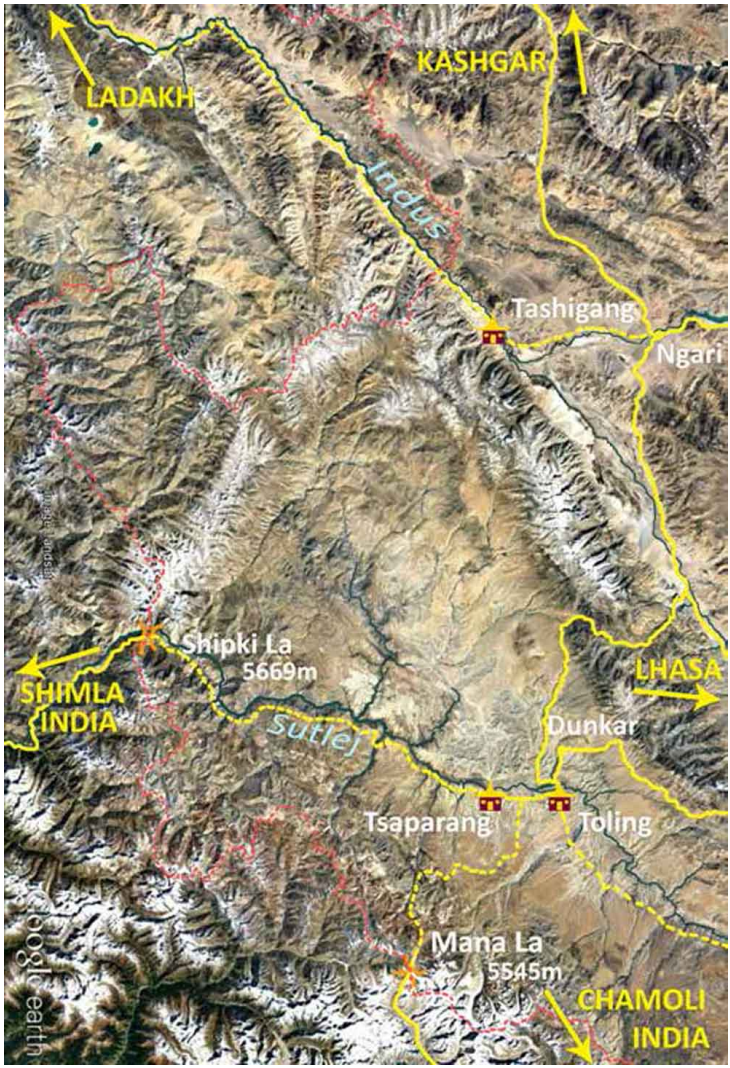
With the re-uniting of the party all the difficulty and disharmony ended. The rain had stopped and the skies cleared so that by their arrival at the monastery there was not a cloud to be seen. Their final walk together down to Simikot was beautiful. The valley was full of sunlight, glistening off the washed

vegetation. They were walking mostly downhill as well as at a lower altitude where everything was easier, so they could just relax and enjoy it all. "It was like walking through the Garden of Eden," Anne told me. "Lush rivers, rainbows, waterfalls, and wonderful to be walking with Ajahn Sumedho again. I remember lots of laughter. It felt like nothing was a big deal. Everyone was friends again. And Michael and Andrew were fine." As if Ajahn Sumedho had been the glue holding it all together.

There was no problem with their flight out of Simikot either, but at Kathmandu, the reservations for their flight home had been cancelled. There'd been no time in the two days of panic before they set off, so Andrew had asked the local agency to confirm them, but they'd forgotten. Andrew, Nick Hodge, Alison and Michael had to pay for new flights the next day with another airline, but the monks, Anne and David were in no hurry and could wait.

"That was a really lovely time," Anne told me. "We stayed in Kopan Monastery again, the rinpoche there was really kind. We all really enjoyed it. It was like paradise after what us laypeople had gone through. You know, I don't think Ajahn Sumedho was meant to go to Kailash."

I later found out why Ajahn Sumedho had been so grumpy when I collected him at the airport. It wasn't disappointment about not getting to Kailash; rather it was because so many people had been wishing him well and now with his return he had to disappoint them all, starting with all the monks and nuns who'd just met him off the flight. Maybe this was why he announced he wouldn't return to Tibet until the Chinese allowed the Dalai Lama in.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7 The Spiritual and the Profane

Looking back, my time in Tibet before the kora around Mount Kailash was mostly pleasant, except for the nights. Not sleeping like that – oscillating from dull, dreamy states through restless overheating to a mind zinging with energy – happens to mountain climbers bivouacking on the side of Everest. It also happens to anyone, like me, suffering mountain sickness. Sharing a room made it harder: I feared disturbing my companions with my restless movement, or getting up too often to sit in meditation until the pull of the bed had me lying down again. So I'd feel trapped. Eventually I'd revolt and break out of the room. Sitting outside in the cold would usually help. I had so much energy in the middle of the first night in Toling I managed a full hour of yoga, every posture I knew, out in the yard under the stars. Nights like that left me completely drained the next day, but fortunately I was doing nothing demanding. If anything, my vacant state helped me enjoy them.

The second night I tried staying put, lying listening to the laboured breathing of my two lay companions. Around three o'clock I opened a window. As the fresh cold air flowed in, their breathing quietened. My breathing became easier too, but not enough to join them in the yearned-for cocoon of sleep. Instead I was now listening to karaoke singing again, but distant this time, as we were not in the Chinese part of town. It was always one man, singing along badly to a series of Chinese pop songs. I spent much of the remaining night wondering at the oddness of that. I've since discovered Chinese soldiers use karaoke booths, each of which has a Tibetan hostess. It's their modern way with

prostitution – downmarket geishas. I now have the sad reflection that perhaps those two young women I'd been circling the stupa with the night before, all dressed up, were on their way to a karaoke bar.

As the trilling of birds started and dawn crept into the room I stole out to follow the worn path to the cliff. Ahead of me walked an old man nattily dressed in black jacket and trousers, a wide dark-brown trilby hat, maroon cardigan and bright yellow shirt, those colours designating his spiritual intent. I'd seen him the evening before with the jacket off and tied jauntily over one shoulder. He was slightly bow-legged and gently rocked side to side as he walked, one hand working dangling brown mala beads, counting the mantras he was murmuring. It seemed a lovely way to start and end each day.

Only older Tibetans were on the cliff that morning. My old chap continued along the cliff's edge while I sat down on a small pile of stones amidst the fluttering prayer flags and gazed blearily out over the river valley now filling with light. Two old ladies came by, smiling and nodding, followed by another old man working his mala beads who also nodded a greeting. Then came a tourist, Japanese or Korean, with a large sophisticated camera and other equipment hanging about his neck, looking to use the morning light. There was no friendly acknowledgment from him. Instead he stopped to correct me. "This is Buddhist religion place. Not to be sitting." He pointed at my pile of stones. I smiled wanly and shrugged; I was just too tired, and the locals didn't seem to mind. The next woman placed a stone on a larger pile nearby, smiled broadly and nodded to me. They'd seen far worse sacrilege than me sitting on a little pile of stones.

The devotion of the older generation reminded me of the west of Ireland when I first visited it in the early eighties. Old people there were pious in the same simple and cheerful way, taking solace from physical acts: walking the stations at pilgrimage sites, reciting the Creed, climbing up to special outdoor services in their

Sunday best, even in the rain. They also often used rosaries to count their prayers. Still today hundreds of thousands of Irish ascend Croagh Patrick, not at all an easy climb, many of them barefooted.

Ireland also has the same collective memory of its early saints, those who first came and practised the religion. In Tibet it is Milarepa, Guru Rinpoche and others, and the numerous venerated caves they are supposed to have lived in. In Ireland it's the Christian saints of the fifth and sixth century and their remote islands – sailing boats still dip their sails when they pass one of these now-uninhabited islands near to us in Galway. There are patterns for each saint's feast day when many boatloads go out to venerate the saint. The grander monasteries of later monastics are far more obvious in the landscape but not given the same veneration: Only archaeologists and historians are interested in them. I suspect it's the quality of those early saints' practice. The first, as with Milarepa, must be exceptional beings to take on a life like that when it's a new religion.

I took Ajahn Sumedho to an Irish monastic island – my favourite, Caher, which sits out in the Atlantic some way off the inhabited Inishturk. It has sixth-century upright stone slabs with crosses carved in relief standing on each slight rise, so that it looks rather like Easter Island in the Pacific with its standing idols. There are the remains of a small chapel, one gable still standing with a narrow, arched window, and a few circles in the turf that archaeologists say were once monastic cells. There is rough grass, nesting birds and the Atlantic waves breaking on the cliffs. There is also the most powerful sense of vocation. Ajahn Sumedho was so moved that he cried as we crossed back to the mainland. Stan, who was with us, took him back later that year to spend five days there on retreat.

The shrine room at Tirthapuri had some of that powerful sense of practice for me, but the desecrated bodhisattva shrine rooms at Toling Monastery did not. With them I felt only sadness. Both had

been recently restored – Toling's shrine rooms also had bare new plaster, new support columns and repaired roofs, but here the improvements felt as pointless as making a fuss over cardboard boxes which once held splendid gifts. I suspect that's because of their function: to impress. Dhammarakkho pointed out how all the shrines faced onto the same large roofed space where there had been a central large Buddha image, of which there was now only the knees and feet, and how this arrangement had formed a life-size, three-dimensional mandala, with each of the bodhisattvas at their appropriate place according to Mahayana teachings. Tantric initiates and devotees would have been led here in awe by the monks. He was excited by this discovery, but for me, all that Tibetan elaboration of the Buddha's original simple teachings with its complicated imagery has never really worked. It was the little piles of dusty bank notes before each empty space that moved me the most.

Dhammarakkho was also upset by the pathetic remnants of the original statues, commenting that at the Tsaparang temples, "there was a sign saying the destruction was done by the Cultural Revolution, and how Chinese archaeologists were now restoring the shrines. As if they were not all the same Communism!" But I felt more in tune with Ajahn Amaro's more reflective response: "until the Greeks invaded India the Buddha was never represented in form. The Red Guards' removal of the images, just leaving defined spaces, has in fact created a more accurate representation." All that proliferation, built up over the centuries, had been swept away. The arising and ceasing of conditioned form is also in line with his teachings.

The murals at the Tsaparang temples, which I missed, are famous and were the principal reason Stephen Batchelor had wanted us to visit Guge. In Morocco he'd told us "Lama Govinda's book, Way of the White Clouds, which we all read in the 1970s, culminates in his visit to Tsaparang. So I've always wanted to see the original frescoes he made copies of, over his months spent there. They are of a period which has disappeared elsewhere in Tibet, a school of art which had its origins in Kashmir and they

connect to the original depiction in the great Indian monasteries. It seems incredibly romantic, if you read about it anyway, these breathtakingly beautiful locations – high desert with innumerable gorges – with the ruined remains of these two old cities providing a repository of this extraordinary art." It also seems wonderful now writing about it, but at the time I was in no state to appreciate that level of subtlety.

Lama Govinda had yearned to see Tsaparang, and it was the principal aim of his expeditions into Tibet after the Second World War, in which his pilgrimage round Mount Kailash only warrants one chapter against Tsaparang's five. Although Govinda first took ordination as a Theravadan monk, he was then drawn to study the mystery and magic of the Tibetan teachings, a tradition in which, conveniently, he could also marry and retain the title of Lama. He was an exotic character, half German, half Peruvian. In a 1950s photo he strikes an amazing pose in front of the London Buddhist Society with his 'spiritual consort', Li Gotami, beside him. His extremely long goatee beard descends from a face framed in a pointed Lama hat and covers the front of his flowing self-styled Tibetan robes, while she is in a flower-patterned, silk Tibetan dress. Govinda's description of Tibet and the Tibetan teachings can be equally flamboyant. Stephen told me as monks they used to refer to his book as 'Head in the White Clouds'.

The temple that did affect me was the oldest one at Toling, known as the Red Temple but once the monastery's main assembly hall, which we'd been shown around on the first day. After we'd toured the mandala of empty boxes I asked Dorje if the Red Temple's big double doors could be opened again. He departed to get permission and eventually an old monk returned with a bunch of giant keys hanging from one hand. He was short and wide with big, bushy, grey eyebrows and his grey hair cropped short in the Tibetan monastic style. His maroon outer robe, thrown over his shoulder, was dusty – maybe he'd been working somewhere. He unlocked the double doors which creaked as he swung them back, then settled down on a cushion placed just inside.

We ventured into the dim interior, each choosing to sit against one of the many pillars, enjoying both the silence and the coolness after the hot afternoon outside. After five minutes a jingle announced the Tibetan monk's mobile phone starting up. We then had to listen to a series of his calls, each time with a faint female response. But it didn't seem to matter: the powerful silence was able to hold it all.

We returned to the hostel after that. There, our two rooms could be such contrasting places. The day before, when I returned from my early morning on the cliff, I found the monks were pottering about after their morning meditation, while in our room Chris was just stirring and Rory, as usual, had to be woken. This time I returned for a discussion in our room about what was for sale in the local Chinese shops and whether we could afford some plain chocolate for the monks – our budget was now very tight – to then visit the monks' room where Dhammarakkho was talking intensely about the seven secret places where the Buddha's teachings are said to reside in Tibet, or some such. Back in our room the TV was now on showing a Chinese football game. "We think it's an under-twenty-one international," Chris told me as I settled down to watch.

We left the hostel after a breakfast of noodles and soup, our little mini-bus driving down and out across the valley into the vast empty landscape, heading towards the stepped cliffs of hardened sediment on the far side. Those cliffs towered over us as our mini-bus climbed, winding back and forth through gorges and out around peninsulas, on our way back to the main road that circles Western Tibet. This time I had enough vitality to pay attention to the amazing scenery and even to ask Dorje if we could stop so that we could stretch our legs, cramped from sitting on seats designed for small Asians, and take in the spectacular views. Rory and I also got a better look at the few small plants; seen from the mini-bus they looked like spots of paint sprinkled across a Jackson Pollock painting. While the others stood gazing at the amazing formations around us, we squatted on our haunches to peer at a tiny rock plant that seemed little more than a moss, but was covered in

minute white-and-yellow flowers.

Later we passed the view we'd stopped for on the way there, looking south across a myriad of valleys sharply eaten into the soft sedimentary rock, to the distant line of the snow-covered Himalayas. From the height of the Tibetan plain the Himalayan peaks were not 'up there', as they seem from India or Nepal, but a jagged white lip jutting up from the edge of what we stood on. Rory had reckoned the most prominent and highest peak must be K2 but on the way back, having realised where the river Sutlej broke through, he'd decided it was Nanda Devi, the highest peak in India.

Before the view, at the point where the land beside the road fell away, previous travellers had built small towers of single flat stones balanced on each other as an offering. There was also a cairn of piled stones covered with white silk khata. At our next stop, at a slight pass in the rolling hills before we descended to the upper Indus valley, the pile of rocks was the height of the mini-bus and completely cocooned in white. Tibet has a landscape that engenders awe and respect, even now with tarmacked roads and petrol vehicles. How much more significant such passes and views must have seemed to those crossing this high-altitude desert on horse or foot. It took four months then: that's how long Father Ippolito Desideri spent, providing Europe with its first proper account of Tibet. He and his companion were Jesuits, like Father Andrade who visited Tsaparang, but on a later mission in 1715, this time to Lhasa. Unlike Andrade, Father Desideri was a great linguist and scholar and it was he who first understood that Buddhism had no connection with Christianity but was a very sophisticated set of teachings, the subtlety of which he greatly admired, while nonetheless still seeing it as the work of the devil.

His wonderful book, A Mission to Tibet, supplemented with a letter written by his companion, describes their epic journey, from Goa via Agra to Kashmir, then over the mountains into Ladakh and from there beside the upper Indus to the small outpost of Tashigang, to the north-west of where our little mini-bus now joined the main road of Western Tibet. Getting to Tashigang had

taken them over a year and was difficult enough, but once there they discovered the small outpost was "the mouth and entrance to a vast frigid wasteland… and we could find no guides willing to take us". Eventually the head lama of the local monastery, who'd enjoyed debating theology with them, secured the protection of a widowed Mongol princess, who was passing on her way back to Lhasa with her husband's soldiers. Without her help they'd never have made it. They crossed in mid-winter, sleeping outside, wrapped in sheep skins, as their tents were impossible to erect with the strong winds and frozen ground. Each evening they gathered yak dung to fuel fires for melting snow. Crossing in summer was impossible, they reported, because there was no water. But in winter there was only the poor fodder for their horses carried on yaks. Their own party had seven horses: only two made it to Lhasa and one of them died two days later. Father Freyre, the companion, would have died, too, if the princess hadn't sent her soldiers back to find him one night, huddled for warmth beside his dead horse.

Father Desideri's description of the Tibet he found on the other side of the desert is fascinating. The vast university monasteries with thousands of monks seem exactly the same as those described later by Chandra Das, sent as a spy by the British in 1879, and by Alexandra David-Neel, who travelled through Tibet in 1924 disguised as a monk. The monasteries changed so little because Tibet was a deeply conservative society, totally inward-looking, kept that way by those same monasteries. Institutional religion can do that to society when it has too much power. Father Desideri was deeply impressed with the life of study at the monasteries, but then, as a Jesuit mixing with the top of the monastic hierarchy, that's not surprising. Alexandra David-Neel, who was a socialist as well as a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, was not. She was shocked at how little real religious practice she saw, other than rites and rituals, and reckoned the monasteries were oppressors of the people. She even welcomed the invasion by the Communist Chinese when it happened at the end of her life. The last reports we have of the old monasteries are the romantic

descriptions of Lama Govinda, after which the Chinese closed Tibet to all outsiders.

Tibet didn't open again for thirty years. When it did, in 1986, Stephen Batchelor, recently disrobed as a Buddhist monk, was beginning a visit to China with Martine, who was about to become his wife. "We'd posted the banns in Hong Kong and had to wait a month. So we went into China looking for old Chan monasteries. Once there, we heard Tibet had just been opened, so we booked a flight to Lhasa."

"You spoke Tibetan."

"Yes, that made it incredibly moving. They were speechless when they realised. I was invited into so many people's homes. They told us their personal stories; it was terrible, heart-rending, what they'd all gone through. One thing I was really struck by was how they felt abandoned by the Tibetans who'd escaped to India."

I told him how we'd found the same in Latvia when I was there after the fall of the Soviet Union with Ajahn Viradhammo, who spoke Latvian. The peasants were left to suffer under the Communists, while the ones with money had all fled.

"Yes, except in Tibet the monks had no money, but they had the savvy and connections to leave. And of course the aristocracy, with the money, escaped too. It was extremely interesting. They were also telling me 'look, don't blame the Chinese, the Tibetans were just as involved in this.'"

"Really?"

"Yes, of course. The Chinese released a whole layer of frustration and rage against the oppression by the ruling class, including the monasteries. It's understandable. The average Tibetan had a miserable existence. The Communist cadres included Tibetans who wanted to see the back of the aristocracy, the back of a feudal society and of a life where they were bonded labour. But if I mention this to the Free Tibet people they say I'm just trotting out Chinese propaganda.

"But what they then went through was absolutely awful, I'm not denying that. I spoke to a Tibetan monk who'd spent twenty-five years in a labour camp. I visited Sara monastery, where my

teacher came from and whose tradition I trained in. There the Chinese had recently allowed monks again so there were lots of little kids and only a handful of really old monks. The middle generation had been completely wiped out. That was really sad. They even asked me to teach them!"

Stephen made several trips out of Lhasa. "The Chinese supposedly didn't allow you beyond the city boundaries but there was no way of policing it and the Tibetans were perfectly happy to take you wherever you wanted. So there were Bradley Mayhew and Victor Chang, who just took off with a backpack and hiked all through that region. They were the first in the modern era to do the kora round Mount Kailash. And we did the same. Just took off." They went to Ganden Monastery, where Stephen's Gelug-pa tradition originated, and which is one of its three great university monasteries.

"There the Chinese told the locals they could help themselves to all the building materials. The local Tibetans told me that. Of course it's difficult to be certain from this distance in time and many argue now that the Chinese forced the Tibetans to tear down the monasteries to rub their faces in the destruction of their own culture, which I wouldn't put past the Communist Chinese. But you still have to accept the enormous resentment against the monasteries, the biggest landowners in a feudal society. Peasants were not paid, they were owned. They had to have permission to leave the estates."

On our trip through Western Tibet I asked our guide, Dorje, if the Tibetans had been involved in the destruction of their own monasteries and if they'd done it freely, as Stephen had suggested.

"Sure, of course. They wanted a new life." But then, Dorje wouldn't have been born then.

Stephen's visit to Tibet was, in effect, the completion of his disillusionment with Tibetan Buddhism, the story of which he gave us as we travelled in Morocco. He said the most difficult part was leaving his teacher.

"Geshe Rabten was the reason I lasted so long. He was a farm boy from Eastern Tibet, the eldest son in Tibetan culture where

it's only the second son who goes to the monastery. The eldest is expected to take care of the father in old age. But at nineteen he ran away to become a monk, crossing Tibet by foot, from Yarm to Lhasa. Because he didn't have his family's support he had no benefactor, so he got malnutrition in the monastery, which gave him diabetes in later life. That's what ended up killing him. He was a very good scholar, very bright. Eventually he became the tutor of a young tulku, one of the reincarnated lamas, and once he got that position he was taken care of. He escaped to India with the tulku and there he was appointed as the Dalai Lama's philosophical advisor, which means his debating partner."

"How was he with those Goenka vipassana retreats we did?"

"He had no problem with me doing them. He admired Theravada, particularly the way the Thai and Burmese monks kept the Vinaya", their rules. "He was very strict himself. He didn't handle money, refused to take any charges for the courses he taught, was never alone in a room with a woman. That was extremely unusual for a Tibetan monk. He never gave tantric initiations either, even refused to give us the bodhisattva vow. According to the Tibetan tradition, if you give the vow to another, and then they break it, then they and you go to hell.

"So he was not your average Tibetan lama," Stephen explained. "When Westerners first came to Dharamsala he was on a long solitary retreat in a hut on the hillside. When he came out the Dalai Lama asked him to teach us. Most lamas, if they do those long retreats, don't do them to find enlightenment, as he did, but to gain merit, or some kind of tantric power, or to see them through Bardo at death. But he was never critical of anything in the tradition. He had complete unquestioning faith and took it all at face value. What was different, and so important for me, was he didn't pretend he was some great tantric lama or whatever, like most of them do."

"Did he die while you were in Korea?"

"No. I came back from Korea when I heard he'd got cancer, and he was still alive when I later returned with Martine. We saw him together in Switzerland, but he died that same year."

One's teacher. Stephen already had his when we met on the Vipassana retreat but it was another four years before I found mine. First, I had to become sufficiently disillusioned with the Goenka tradition. If anything, I was more sceptical than Stephen then. I was simply interested in exploring the states of mind those courses produced. I tried to ignore the constant emphasis on the 'purity of the practice' and the rules about who one practised meditation with. But eventually my disquiet became too much and I had to look elsewhere, initially to Zen, which is what Stephen did next.

"The Chan practice in Korea was very helpful for me: the emphasis on sitting meditation and the simple practise of just questioning. But I still had difficulty with the Asian mindset which, actually, still did not question the orthodoxy of their tradition, even though Chan arose from questioning orthodoxy." When their Korean master died a year later and his collection of Western disciples started to dissipate, Stephen sent a note to Martine, the most senior of them, asking if she'd marry him. She accepted by return note and they agreed to leave separately and meet in Hong Kong to avoid any sense of scandal.

The two of them have now become well-known Buddhist teachers themselves, and Stephen is a Buddhist theologian whose theology is based on his sceptical approach. I find it ironic that in the forty years we've known each other we seem to have swapped sides. When we met he was starting his monastic training in the Tibetan tradition, which is crammed full of the irrational and superstitious, while I practised in a secular tradition and was returning to England to train as a rational scientist. We'd occasionally hear from each other in our very different worlds through mutual friends. Today, he proclaims Secular Buddhism as a path and there are fundamental aspects of the Buddhist teaching which he dismisses, including rebirth and the notion that anyone, including the Buddha, could be completely enlightened. While I've now seen too much that I can't explain rationally to dismiss such things completely, but I really welcome the way Stephen encourages us to question everything.

I was fortunate eventually to find a teacher who questioned it all himself. Even in the early days there would be resistance from other monastics to some of the things Ajahn Sumedho said and did, like talking openly of states such as the unconditioned, emptiness, the deathless and even nirvana as something to be experienced, rather than worshipped. He also encouraged us to see religious convention simply as 'form' to be seen through, rather than something to embrace or resist.

I remember a year or two after we set up a little branch monastery in North East England, Ajahn Sumedho came to visit with some of the other Western monks. They were going on from there to stay for several days at a Cistercian monastery in Scotland. Over breakfast, in the small shrine room, he suggested that whilst there, they should follow the Cistercian monastic conventions, rather than insisting on their own. "Their form is just as strict as ours – it's just different." Actually I think all he was proposing was they eat lunch with the community, rather than asking for theirs to be served earlier, even though that might mean eating past noon, when Theravadan Buddhist monks are not meant to eat. There was complete silence as the others considered this. I suspect that's why one of them, now Ajahn Sucitto, but then a junior monk, refused to go.

But I appreciated that adaptability. It was not that Ajahn Sumedho was lax. I remember managing a retreat he was teaching back then. The afternoon coffee we'd been leaving in his room was left untouched, even though he really enjoyed coffee. So I was sent to ask why. He explained we hadn't offered it to him, which meant by a strict interpretation of his Vinaya rules he could not assume it was his, or even ask.

In Tibet, Ajahn Amaro agreed to my suggestion that they continue to follow Nepalese time in working out midday – Tibet being on Peking time, several hours out of sync with the sun. But there would be no other compromise, which was something he made very clear to Dorje, several times. That's why we set out early that morning from Toling on the next leg of our journey, back to Mount Kailash, as there was only one place to eat that day:

Montser, the small scattering of homesteads on the empty desert plain, we'd passed going the other way. We ate at a restaurant painted in bright colours with a large sign above the door proclaiming its name, 'Peace Tibetan Meal'. Dorje translated the limited choice of dishes listed by the middle-aged female proprietor. We opted for Tibetan noodle stew again: large bowls with flat floppy noodles, hand-made I suspect, floating in a stew of minced meat and a few vegetables. Dorje and the driver had a similar stew but with misshapen lumps of dough in it. With this, they ate slices carved with their own large knives from the hunk of dried mutton the driver produced at each meal. Tibetan food is not subtle, and understandably based on meat. Our vegetarians just got the few vegetables in their stew, but Dhammarakkho was very happy.

I cycled across Ireland last year, coast to coast from County Down to County Galway, using the smallest country lanes shown on the ordnance survey maps. Just inside Galway I stopped to look in a graveyard, where my map indicated some kind of abbey. I found an old ruined church, common in the west of Ireland where their Catholic religion was horribly persecuted by the Protestant Cromwellians. These were iconoclasts like the Red Guards, imposing their cultural revolution also on a foreign, more backward land and destroying everything religious they could find. I called out to two elderly men working at the far end of the graveyard. Was there an information board? They made their way slowly over to where I was standing, looking puzzled.

"There's a list of the graves in the community centre."

"No, I mean this old church. Do you know anything about it?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Well, who's that?" I indicated an outline carving on an upright stone. "Saint Patrick?"

"Why no, that's Saint Kerrill."

"Saint Kerrill?"

"You don't know Saint Kerrill!" He was really surprised. "This

was his monastery. And this townland is Clonkeenkerrill! " And he proceeded to tell me how at the time of Saint Patrick, which was the late fifth century, there had been a monastery founded here by Saint Kerrill and that the raised flat oblong bench in front of me was 'Saint Kerrill's bed' on which every coffin to be buried in the graveyard had to first rest. "But never on a Monday. There's no burying on a Monday."

"Why ever not?"

"Because it was a Monday when Saint Kerrill fell out with Saint Connell, who had his monastery over there." He pointed vaguely to the southeast.

I assumed at the time that Saint Kerrill must be a famous Irish saint I'd not heard of, but when I later asked my Irish friends, all of who lived less than twenty miles away, none had heard of him, only of the strange name of the townland.

Maybe I'm being romantic to think the locals still remember Saint Kerrill today because of the quality of his practice and how much it meant for the society then. But that was a time when the religion was new and fresh, before it had also become about power. Those crosses carved on the upright slabs on the monastic Caher Island are also from the start of Celtic Christianity. Eventually they led to the famous stone Celtic High Crosses carved with fabulous imagery by stone masons that date from five centuries later which are also wonderful and I do enjoy them, but not in the same way. As with much that later developed in the Tibetan monasteries, their primary function was not about religious practice but to impress and to attract pilgrims for support.

Mount Kailash, however, has been too remote and inhospitable for developments like that. Past pilgrim accounts describe harrowingly difficult journeys to a romantically remote location where only a few monks lived permanently. Before Tibet closed to the outside world, the journey was only possible on foot or by horse, and expeditions took months. Even recent accounts involved travelling in jeeps that had to ford rivers, or riding with Tibetan pilgrims filling the backs of trucks that threw up a cloud

of dust from the dirt tracks meandering and criss-crossing through the desert. It was something only for the seriously committed. That notion had already been undermined for us by the relative comfort of our mini-bus driving on the new tarmac roads, but when we got to Mount Kailash we found the Chinese had also built a modern visitor centre. It sits on the plain before the mountain, utterly incongruous, and not at all what we'd been led to expect. There was even an immense concrete billboard on a tall concrete stand announcing where we were. I'm afraid those iconic photographs of a remote and austere white mountain, standing alone in a wide plain, are no longer true. But at least you've now been warned. We weren't.

The complex had just been built and much of the visitor centre itself was still a shell, yet to be filled with interpretation panels and merchandising. At least we were spared that. We stopped there to pay for our tickets. Yes, you also have to have a ticket now. While we waited, a Chinese woman came out from a small office with a thermos of hot water with several cups. She'd seen us through the glass door and taken pity. I guessed that to anyone Chinese, combating the cold in Tibet with warm drinks would be very important, even in June. Everyone we saw in that complex was Chinese: the police, the people in the office and some officials standing outside – the only exception was a Tibetan man working round the back doing something menial.

From there the empty land and road rose gently ahead to Darchen at the base of the mountain. At the time of Lama Govinda's visit, Darchen was just a place where pilgrims camped before undertaking the kora. Even when Andrew and the laypeople from Ajahn Sumedho's party were there it only had a few wooden buildings and they stayed instead at the temple beside Lake Manasarovar. Now there are modern hotel complexes with new ones being built, cranes standing beside them and Tibetans toiling in shiny, new, plastic hard hats. As Dorje showed our papers at the police post beside a line of dilapidated wooden shops, loud Chinese pop music blared out from a building site and a strong wind blew rubbish along the dirt street ahead. It was the least

appealing entrance to a holy site I'd ever seen.

We couldn't afford the comfort of one of the new hotels. Instead Dorje found us two dormitory rooms in a Tibetan pilgrim hostel down a side street. It was good enough: the rooms were moderately clean, although the one toilet across the dirt yard was not somewhere to linger. Once we'd settled we assembled to discuss our start. We'd gained an extra day because the military in Toling had refused Dorje a pass to visit the Dungka cave site with its fabulous murals. Our new plan had been to save that extra day for Lake Manasarovar so we could spend more time there, after we'd circled Mount Kailash, but Ajahn Amaro suggested instead we take a day's rest at Darchen so that Appamado could recover. His migraines were getting worse and a day travelling in the minibus had been particularly difficult. So now we debated what to do, with the conversation going round in circles. I cringed inside at the idea of a whole day spent in Darchen but had to accept it might be best for Appamado, who was looking very pained but not wanting to put us out. Chris appeared even more horrified but was also trying to be reasonable. But then I asked Appamado directly: setting aside everyone else, what did he actually want to do himself? To everyone's surprise he said he wanted to start in the morning! He'd found that exercise, although really difficult, could relieve the pain. So Chris and I went off to buy supplies for an early start. We found chocolate, sucking sweets, nuts and dried fruit, as well as several beggars and some other Westerners, possibly Russian, collecting their supplies for the kora.

Next morning our pilgrimage round Mount Kailash began. We set out with a porter carrying my pack crammed with all our sleeping bags. The rest of our belongings were put into the minibus to await our return. The driver saw us off, Dorje and the porter leading us through the few dirty streets, each of us with a small day pack on our backs, Ajahn Amaro and I with our wooden walking staffs, the others with metal walking poles clicking on the ground. A wide, worn footpath headed west around the mountain's base.

I'd promised myself I'd keep within my capabilities so that I

might enjoy the walk that day. I managed to keep up with the others initially, but only until the edge of town. Then I started to fade. Each time I stopped to regain my breath, leaning on my staff, the others pulled further ahead. But I was enjoying it.

We were heading west – the kora circles clockwise so keeping the right shoulder to the mountain which is respectful in Buddhism – and following a broad path skirting Mount Kailash's base and rising only slightly. Tibetan pilgrims passed me: families, a father looking close to my age but probably younger, with the youngest child on his back, even a grandmother in traditional clothes and a walking stick. The Tibetans had loose padded jackets, blankets, a variety of hats and all carried small sacks of tsampa, the ground roasted barley which is Tibet's staple food, some slung on backs, others tied to waists. It was uplifting to walk with these simple poor people, even if I couldn't keep up – even with grandmother. A yak passed laden with baggage, the owner behind whistling an occasional encouragement, his wife on a sweet white pony.

The mountain beside us was obscured, the base of the cloud was just above the path ahead where it turned to enter a valley, but to my left I could see across a vast ochre plain with a dark lake in the distance. Beyond the lake: white Himalayan mountains, with just a few clouds.

As I walked on, my staff stepping out a slow but steady rhythm, more and more Tibetans passed me, many now cantering along on ponies. They were mostly single men, often with wide cowboy hats, but some were women. These were locals, I surmised, hoping to give rides to the Indians we'd seen flying up from Nepal in the helicopter, but there were a surprising lot of them. A young lad, dressed in jeans and denim jacket, also passed on a motorbike, his girlfriend hanging on to his back.

At the turn, where the path headed up the valley, the others were waiting. I rested on a rock but told Dorje to go on. I was fine, just taking it easy so as to enjoy it all, I assured him. I couldn't get lost and we'd meet at the day's end. Beside my rock was a large cairn of stones; many were mani stones, carved with the sacred

symbols of the mantra Om mani padme hum, an invocation containing the essence, they say, of the Buddhist teachings. From here the path headed north, now gently descending as the valley rose to meet it. Where they met, the Tibetans on the ponies congregated in a large dusty flat area, with Nissan huts nearby. This was as far as vehicles could drive on the dirt road that came up the valley, and where the kora proper was said to start. I could see the huge flag pole just beyond, which had been erected for Saka Dawa, the celebration of the Buddha's enlightenment for which we had been at Yalbang Monastery. It is said that the successful erection of the flag pole ensures a good year for Tibet. Lines of prayer flags, looking tiny from my vantage point, radiated out in all directions. I could hear the murmur of many voices even at this distance. It was quite some crowd and Tibetans on ponies were still passing me and trotting down the slope.

Then a modern blue coach appeared below me, driving up the dirt road with a dust cloud in its wake, followed by another. As I continued down the path towards the resulting commotion, their honking echoed off the valley walls. From the coaches clambered Indians, all in large, nylon, puffy jackets, as yet another two coaches appeared, driving up the track followed by their dust cloud. There were far more Indians than could ever have got here by the red-and-white helicopter. They must be coming from Kathmandu by coach, I realised, along the new tarmac road. That was the reason for all the Tibetans with ponies and the hotel building. There were going to be hundreds of them going round the mountain with us!

The path took me past the coaches and through the middle of the now milling throng of Indians, ponies, and Tibetans. An Indian in front of the first coach bellowed out instructions in Hindi through a megaphone above the din of all the excited voices, the shouting of Tibetan horsemen looking for customers, and the whinnying of their ponies. An extremely overweight young Indian woman was taking a photograph with her smartphone of her more moderately overweight female friends, who were chatting excitedly. Alpine choughs circled, screeching, dropping down to

pick up scraps in their yellow beaks from the dusty floor, which was littered with dung, discarded food wrappers and drinks cans.

Just beyond the hubbub was a square stupa marking the start of the kora. It had an arched gap through which the pilgrim steps. I'd intended stopping here to acknowledge my start of the kora, as Roger had told us we should, maybe even doing his three full-length prostrations to show the seriousness of my commitment. But now I abandoned all that. I could only think of getting away from the bedlam behind me. I stepped through as the first of the Indian pilgrims started to circumambulate the stupa, holding lighted incense sticks before them, while two others on their knees started to prostrate to it. At least my start was honoured by them.

N
Drirapuk
4950m
Dolma La
5660m
KAILASH
6714m
Chuko
Serlung
Gyangdrak
Dzutrulpuk
4835m
DARCHEN
4650m
0 1 2 3
Kms
Google earth

8 Facing Difficulty

Ajahn Sumedho eventually made it to Mount Kailash. He was taken by a group of Americans when he was 68 in 2002. On my return from Tibet, one of them, John Levy, sent me a slide-show he and the organiser, Hal Nathan, had shown in their hometown in California. That was soon after their return, eleven years before. I watched it a dozen times.

It was surreal and quite moving, to see Ajahn Sumedho undertake the same gruelling pilgrimage I'd just done. There they were, assembling in Kathmandu, visiting Swayambhunath as we had, with the long flight of stone steps leading ever upwards, the monkeys, the religious commotion at the top with pilgrims, tourists, and a group of Newari musicians in full swing. In one slide Ajahn Sumedho turns a prayer wheel as he passes. They went to Boudnath too, the immense squat stupa smiling down at the camera, and to a Hindu temple, with chatting sadhus hanging out together, incense smoke curling upwards. There are street scenes and one of their pilgrimage party grouped together. I counted ten: two monks, three laymen and five women. It was Hal who told me over the phone how the monks got to go.

"My wife and I had trekked in Nepal, done Solukhumbu and other stuff, then this Tibetan friend of ours, who works for the American Himalaya Foundation in Kathmandu, said, 'Now you've got to do Kailash.' So we got a group together for May 2002. There was Iwana, the wife of Norbu Tenzing, who runs the Foundation here in America – she's Polish – and two friends of hers, Lori and Marline; John Levy with his adult son, Alex; and a woman friend of ours, Beverly. Then we were on a retreat taught

by Ajahn Sumedho at Spirit Rock in 2001. I'm on the board there. Sumedho told us what had happened to him and so we said, 'Hey, why don't you come with us?' His assistant, Pannasaro, did the co-ordinating, we got them tickets and the rest is history. It was really a joy to have him along, just incredible. What a spirit he was!"

"So the others hadn't known he'd be coming?"

"That's right. They signed up before that. Then our neighbour, Micheline, who's French-Canadian, came when my wife couldn't."

A slide taken in Kathmandu shows the two Theravadan monks passing a luxurious swimming pool in beautiful grounds set before what must be a five-star hotel. Another shows the front of an equally well-appointed Tibetan monastic building, with them all preparing to go in. Ajahn Sumedho is holding a khata offering scarf. Then they're meeting a Tibetan lama, who sits cross-legged behind a low table at the head of the reception room, on a seat slightly higher than his visitors. They are all drinking tea from china tea cups and then the lama is writing something out for them. Finally there's a photo with a smiling Iwana and her friend, Lori, sitting either side of him, their silk khatas, which have been offered back to them, round their necks. The lama is also smiling and leaning forward so he can put his arms round their shoulders. Ajahn Sumedho doesn't appear in any of these photos: all the Rinpoche's attention appears to be for the women.

"We couldn't walk into Tibet like you did," John Levy told me when I phoned him. "Those valleys had the Maoists in them then. So we had to drive to Mount Kailash." I still recognised their route though, as this was the way we'd returned after our kora. The first terraces of green paddy fields rising up steep slopes, Nepalese villagers working with water buffalo. Then the border bridge, the near-vertical forested valley sides as the road climbs up through the Himalayas to the Tibetan plateau, and Nyalam.

"Yeah," Hal told me, "we stayed in one of those frontier towns in Tibet where the accommodation was ungodly." The Snow Land Hotel certainly doesn't look five star. "So we camped outside town to acclimatise and do some trekking." Four smart blue tents are lined up, pitched perfectly, in a line, military style, on a green

mountainside. Other blue tents in the background would be for the Sherpas and the one on its own for the monks. Two little blue toilet tents are set discreetly down the slope with a view into the abyss below and across to distant mountains, with jagged tops covered in snow. In another slide they are returning from a trek wearing thick layers with waterproofs over the top, some of them, including the two monks, leaning on light metal walking poles. Ajahn Sumedho looks tired.

"Nyalam's where we met our transport. A big truck for the gear and these three land cruisers with Tibetan drivers."

"And you also kept the Sherpas you came with from Kathmandu?"

"Yeah, and our friend Tsedo from Mala Treks. So we had quite a crew." I count eleven in total. Some contrast to our small mini-bus, Dorje and driver.

"We drove overland from East to West. I don't know what that's like now, but then it was God awful," Hal told me. "To call it a road was being kind to it and at fifteen thousand feet we were right up there and people started to get real sick along the way. That includes both monks." The slides show wide vistas of an empty dry landscape with a distant white jagged Himalayan wall running across the background. The foregrounds have patches of dry grass and one slide shows a dark blob in the near distance which, looking closer, is a nomad family's camp. Another is taken through a dust-streaked windscreen and shows two land cruisers ahead throwing up dust clouds.

There is a photo of them waiting to cross a small river by ferry, a platform supported by two pontoons connected by cable to the river banks. They're parked behind a line of open-backed pilgrim trucks with blue wooden slatted sides, decorated with prayer flags. Each truck's cargo of Tibetan pilgrims stands to one side, chatting. Nearly all are in traditional clothes, the women in long, black wrapped dresses with colourful striped aprons, the men wearing loose, knee-length, Mongolian-style coats, the front two flaps reaching to the opposite waist and low enough that an arm can be tucked casually inside. The men mostly wear wide-brimmed hats

while the women have thick scarves tied tightly under chins – even a baby on a mother's back wears one. Their bedding and sacks with their belongings are piled inside the trucks. The next slide shows two trucks crossing on the ferry with twenty pilgrims crammed onto the back of each.

The landscape has changed again. The dry grass has mostly gone, replaced in places with a white smear of dried salt. There are rounded, lower mountains. They stop in a Tibetan hostel, much like the one in Darchen we stayed in, except their tents are lined up in the courtyard, four together and one apart for the monks, along with the land cruisers. Presumably the crew slept in the dormitory-style rooms we occupied. Then the land cruisers are lurching down and into a small river, which they cross, creating waves of turbulence in the water behind them.

"It took us three days to get to Mount Kailash, to…."

"Darchen?" I suggested to Hal.

"Yeah, a real dump with prostitutes. It's a real hell hole. There were other groups waiting there for days: these Europeans, Swiss they were, had been ten days waiting for a guide and yaks to take them round. But hey, we got real lucky! Because of the American Himalayan support for that health centre there. I don't know if you went up to that place? No? Well there's a centre there for holistic medicine and homeopathic stuff. Tsedo knew the doctor, who drove out onto the flat lands to get his brother and sister who were yak herders to bring their yaks in and hook us up. So next morning we could set off to do that circuit.

"It was the year of the horse when you get extra credit if you go round," he explained. "So there were huge numbers of locals and that was why it was so tough to get started. All the Tibetans were coming in the back of these old blue Chinese trucks, for days. Then they would get up at four in the morning and take off and do that darn thing in a day in their sneakers and whatever they were wearing. It was an incredible sight to see them all going up that trail."

The year that was in it, as they like to say here in Ireland, would also be the explanation for the number of colourful Tibetan

marquees, covered in swirling designs like the one we slept in at Tirthapuri. At the start of our pilgrimage we saw nothing like that. But then there are no overweight Indians shown in their slides, no modern coaches, Nissan huts or Tibetans with ponies, just lots of Tibetan pilgrims and their one group of Americans.

A slide shows their group about to set off, standing in line for the camera. Next, Ven. Pannasaro is leaning on his walking stick and gazing out at the vast plain from the path that climbs gently out of Darchen. There's the stupa of stones on the corner where the path turns into the first valley and then they are passing what Hal referred to as "that giant maypole". It is lying on its side waiting for the celebration of Saka Dawa in a few days' time; for us, it had already been erected.

"Ajahn Sumedho did a little ceremony, a blessing ceremony, and then we started hiking round that mountain." Their hiking wasn't far that first day; they only did half of what we did. But then we didn't camp – which was down to Roger.

For Roger, luggage was "your negative karma" and should be carried on your own back, he told us in Kathmandu. If it was heavy that was because "this is your anxiety; the more anxious you are, the more you take. So it is good to suffer the consequences." He did concede that walking in from Nepal carrying all our camping gear might be too much. But for his beloved kora round Mount Kailash, he had done it himself, the first time, with just a shoulder bag and blanket. "You can sleep and eat at the gompas, where they give you bedding. All you must have is water. In a bottle carrier hung from your shoulder so you can drink easily." I was willing to do it like that and Dhammarakkho was positively inspired with the idea. "That's how I do tudong!" But the others were more cautious. Our compromise was to hire a local man to carry one pack – mine, as it was the largest – and load it with our sleeping bags and a few other bits of 'negative karma'. But we did buy the locally made water bottle carriers Roger recommended.

Roger had an interesting combination of strong opinions. He seemed to accept without question every belief the Tibetans had about Kailash, to which he often added his own New-Age

interpretations (he'd asked me to bring three pound coins to Kathmandu as they were "excellent for throwing the I Ching"), but then he could be so grounded about practical things. He was completely right, for instance, about those water bottles. Mine was so easy to drink from I could even manage it while standing utterly exhausted, leant on my staff trying to recover enough energy to manage a few more steps.

He also warned us, in his way, about the commotion and the coaches of Indians at the start. It had just been too obtuse for me. "There's this market situation, a function of a miserable thing that has happened. Do not engage in that. You must stay in your kora. Stay in your centre, not moving. Then there is a fence, beyond: there is none of that."

He was again right. Once beyond the fence there was just the valley with a small river, a wide path, sun-lit splashes here and there. Only our party was ahead, strung out with Dorje and the porter in the distance, plus the occasional group of Tibetans ambling along. The valley was wide and U-shaped, with steep rock sides – carved originally by a massive glacier flowing down it. It was sparsely vegetated, even vaguely green, rather than the ochre of the plain, and gently undulating as it rose slowly between the mountains. Above, the low clouds were gradually parting to reveal black mountain side, with glimpses of white peaks above. It was, as Roger had said, beautiful and spacious. But the notion I now had that I could keep it like that, by increasing my stride to leave the Indians behind, proved nonsense. I exhausted myself just walking at my normal pace for twenty minutes. There was no way I could keep that up. I'd just have to give in and let them catch me up. All of them.

While I was still recovering, the more athletic Indians passed me – several young guys wearing trainers, and a middle-aged couple with proper walking boots and walking poles. Next, as I continued on more slowly, came snaking lines of Indians on ponies, in groups of a dozen or so, the Indians all wearing coloured puffy jackets, mostly the same bright red but some in fawn, brown or blue, with the tour company name on the back:

Rika Travels, Sharma Travels. The same names were on their shoulder bags, carried by the pony's Tibetan owner who was usually holding the reins and walking ahead or occasionally sauntering along behind. These were mostly young Tibetan men and women, a few traditionally dressed but most wearing an assortment of Western-style clothes: jeans and jackets, with wide hats or scarves. One had music playing from his mobile phone. With each group, I would stand aside to let them pass before walking slowly on.

After a while, even the other Indians on foot were passing me. Some also wore the puffy jackets, but mostly they were in their own clothes – thick layers of jumpers topped with a woollen balaclava pulled down to frame their face. I was struck by their ordinariness. Lower middle class: office workers, say, or shop keepers. Few seemed to have much English, not that I or they wanted to chat. We were all intent on the difficulty of just managing to walk, stopping regularly to rest, me on my staff, they on simple walking sticks they'd bought from stands beside where the coaches parked.

I was now part of a stream of people, ponies, and occasionally even yaks laden with supplies, winding up the valley. I could see the line twisting ahead and behind me. And it was just fine. Having given in and returned to a slow pace I was able to enjoy it again: me and all these Indians walking round holy Kailash.

The only person slower than me was a lone Tibetan woman prostrating her way round the mountain. Three steps, hands clapped loudly together in prayer then raised, bow, bend, kneel, prostrate full length on the floor, arms and hands stretching out before her. The next three steps would take her only as far as her hands had just reached. Thus she would circle the mountain in body lengths. To protect her front she wore a full-length hide apron of rough goat skins tied round her back and neck. On her hands she had gloves with flat wooden fronts. It was these that she clapped together before she raised them above her head then bowed into each prostration. She looked in her late thirties, the first slight flecks of grey showing in her black hair, and, under the

hide apron, dressed in sophisticated city dweller's jeans and rain jacket. An Indian woman pilgrim passing her bent and lightly touched her feet as a blessing. When a group of Indians on ponies came past she marked her last prostration with a stone before stepping aside, as I had. As I went on, I could hear both the jiggling sound of the ponies receding ahead and the clap of her wooden gloves behind me.

After a standing rest I could manage about fifteen minutes' slow walking before having to take another. Each time I'd have to resist sitting down – so pleasant, it was too hard to get up – instead I'd lean on my staff, which was just the right height for my overlapping hands clasped atop it to support my chin. Leaning like that, looking ahead, too tired to think or take much in, the clap of the wooden gloves somewhere behind me, I was passed by Indians on foot. I would wait there for some sense of vitality to return. Then when I started again I might in turn pass them, as they stopped to regain their breath, but then I'd be passed again and eventually they would leave me behind.

The clouds were steadily moving higher, revealing mountain walls on both valley sides, the further one with a small monastery, one of the fortified ones the Tibetans call a gompa, set just beneath a rocky cliff face. It looked toy-like on the side of the mountain: a maroon-and-white doll's house with a tiny golden spire on its flat roof. Above me, the west face of Mount Kailash was starting to show, sheer black rock with snow above, the rest still in cloud. I came to a pile of rocks with prayer flags beside the path. This must be what Roger called "the second Om, where one does three prostrations towards the mountain and one's wisdom wish – 'may I be well for the sake of all beings,' things like that…" All I could manage was to lean on my staff and take in the amazing mountain. It was only the thought of the tea house he'd said was next that eventually motivated me to action.

There, pilgrims congregated outside a marquee where tethered ponies waited patiently. Inside, Tibetans leant over bowls, forking up streams of noodles, while Indians sat staring vacantly ahead with drinks cans or cups in their hands. Our party was in a row at

one table. Dorje had suggested the monks eat there, Rory told me, as the next stop might be too far. Now they were all drinking tea.

This was probably beyond where Ajahn Sumedho's party camped, as John Levy's slide, showing nine blue tents and a larger mess tent, all set along the base of the mountainside, is followed by pictures of Kailash's west face as seen from the 'Om' prostration spot. Perhaps they only got that far on the first day because the Tibetans had to assemble and load the yaks in the morning to carry all their gear.

Ajahn Sumedho had obviously changed his mind about not returning to Tibet until the Chinese let the Dalai Lama in when he got that second invitation, four years later. Grand statements like that, which might later be thought better of, were typical of him. I remember another: he once told me he didn't want any more monks at Amaravati. That was after he'd been through a particularly painful time with a lot of them leaving. That was forgotten too. Ajahn Sumedho wasn't perfect. But then he didn't pretend to be, or try to hide or explain away any imperfection, as many spiritual teachers can. Instead he would share the suffering caused by his own faults and the insights learnt from it. That I found extremely helpful. I wasn't interested in being devoted to some kind of super being.

But spiritual teachers, if they are any good, are inevitably turned into objects of devotion, even when they try to prevent it. Look at what happened to the Buddha. So, I expect there'll be those who think I shouldn't write about Ajahn Sumedho like this. It could upset and undermine the devotion of the laity. But to my mind, if you are serious about trying to follow in anyone's footsteps, rather than simply being inspired by them, then you have to learn that this person, this monastery, this tradition, or whatever, is not the end point of what one is seeking. Ajahn Sumedho, as he would say over and again, is just a convention, simply another part of this conditioned world that is to be seen through.

Mount Kailash from the south.

Ven. Pannasaro looking south from Kailash on the first morning of the Kora.

Ajahn Sumedho's second pilgrimage: John Levy, Alex Levy, Lori, Iwana, Hal (back), Marline, Micheline, Ajahn Sumedho, Ven. Pannasaro, Beverly.

Indian pilgrims on our kora

The second day of the kora for Ajahn Sumedho's party.

How the same day was for our kora.

The infamous pink plastic lunch bags.

Kailash's north face from Dira Puk Monastery with the three bodhisattvas: Manjushri, Chenrezig, and Vajrapani. In the foreground: Nick, Ven. Dhammarakkho, Ajahn Amaro, Ven. Appamado, Rory, Chris.

Ajahn Sumedho being helped on the climb to Dolma La.

Ven. Pannasaro and others of their party at Dolma La with Tibetan pilgrims.

The shore of Lake Manasarovar with Gurla Mandhata beyond.

Circling Chiu Gompa.

Lama Songu, abbot of Chiu Gompa.

Chanting a blessing for the old Tibetan monk, Khenpo Lobsang Jinpa, at Shri Dhargye Ling Gompa on our return journey.

Tibetan and Therevadan monks hanging out together.

Ajahn Sumedho and Ven. Sugato at Viswa Shanti Vihar with Ven. Jnanapurnika Mahathera and Sister Chini.

The most inspiring memory I have of him is not of some grand teaching he gave but of a time when he was facing real difficulty, showing his own humanity but also managing to rise above it. It was the time of all those monks leaving. There was a cohort of junior 'ajahns' then – monks, mostly he had trained, who'd been a monk for ten years or more. They now wanted to change things, to come out from beneath the father figure and they were encouraged by a more senior monk to make their stand in a

meeting at Chithurst Monastery, where I was then based. I heard that Ajahn Sumedho received a tsunami of criticism with no one there to defend him. The morning after, looking battered, he suggested we go for a walk together on Iping Common, the open heath nearby. He told me, as we strolled along, that he hadn't been that hurt by all the criticism, though the way he said it made me think, "Oh yes you have, mate." But what impressed me was his lack of any anger despite that hurt; there was just compassion. He wanted to talk to me because I knew the senior monk involved. He wanted to know what he might have done wrong to upset him, and what he could do to put it right. It made me reflect that I too had recently been through something similar: a new boss had engineered an attempt to remove me which had finally succeeded, but I'd never once, in over a year, managed such compassion.

The next slides of his second pilgrimage show a stream of Tibetans passing up the valley: presumably that's early the next morning, taken while the party took their breakfast. Then the party is walking again: slides show some of them ahead on the path, then crossing a stream balancing on rocks with the Sherpas helping the women, then walking again. Iwana and Lori are easy to identify: they are wearing traditional Tibetan dresses – full-length black wraparound ones with colourful striped aprons – plus American baseball caps and walking boots. They look very sweet, like Barbie dolls in Barbie's Tibetan costume – they even seem to be wearing make-up.

Next, Ajahn Sumedho's party is sitting around having lunch – each with a metal camping mug and a pink-tinted clear plastic bag of sandwiches. I'd already heard of these through other monks: back in the UK, pink plastic bags like those would bring back the horror of it for Ajahn Sumedho. Neither of the monks could eat the lunch – stale bread with cheese slices and a hard-boiled egg – because they were feeling too nauseous. So they'd become steadily weaker. I asked Hal about that.

"Yeah, a lot of them were feeling that way – real nauseous, particularly the two monks."

"So your main meal was in the evening was it, when the monks

couldn't eat?"

"Yeah, you're right. It would have been difficult to cook a special meal for them so they just had those crazy packed lunches. Then the perishables ran out real quick and the diesel fuel spilled on the rest in the back of the wagon so it was bad for everyone – just boiled eggs and dhal. Then with the high altitude, people's appetite wasn't good, particularly the monks'."

"What about the rest of the group? Someone told me that some of the women were really into Tibetan Buddhism."

"Lori and Norbu's wife, Iwana, yeah, they were involved in the Tibetan thing in a big way, prostrations and all, and they really got off on the Tibetan lamas we met. I don't think they appreciated who Sumedho was. They were on a Tibetan pilgrimage and they just stayed in their Tibetan tradition as they walked round."

Ajahn Sumedho must have really missed Andrew Yeats, who had the experience to be able to adapt things to suit monks, but I'm certain he never complained.

I, too, couldn't eat much at the lunch stop. I just had tea and some kind of biscuit. I then started off after the others, not wanting to be left too far behind. Dorje and the porter had gone on to arrange our stay that evening in Dira Puk Gompa and I wanted to ensure I got there. "Six or seven hours of casual walking. Very easy, flat, a beautiful valley." Roger's description ran as a reassuring mantra in my head. I reckoned all I had to do was keep going. No need to hurry. Just enjoy it. The wide valley led ahead, rising gently.

There now seemed as many Indians coming down the valley as going up. These were the ones who'd realised they couldn't manage the next day's climb over the pass and had opted to go back. Although now going downhill, they looked no better than those going up. None looked as if they ever took real exercise in their ordinary lives, let alone trekking round a mountain at altitude. The few hours that morning had exhausted those coming up the valley, so now we were all going at the same slow pace: five

or ten minutes' slow walking, stopping, standing to recover, then another short walk. There was little talking. But the overweight Indians on the ponies spoke as they passed.

"Excuse me, what is your country?"

"You are coming on religious yatra to holy mountain?"

I didn't need to give a reply, just nod or grunt a greeting. They were soon past, wobbling and swaying ahead of me. Each large bright-red body swaying one way, atop its pony, as its head with its balaclava moved in the opposite direction. The tip of the hat, which was free, would flop to the same side. Then, with the next step of the pony, everything would reverse. When one of the ponies stopped opposite me to defecate, lifting its tail to emit steaming dung, the Indian atop had no idea what was happening and rocked back and forth impatiently. None of them could ever have ridden a horse before. Rory saw one fall off at the tea house. He just flopped sideways, Rory told me, when the horse took a particularly large step.

Of course, not all of the Indians on ponies were overweight, but most were, some of them spectacularly so. At the tea house there was one woman so large it took two extra Tibetans to get her remounted: one to help the owner push her up, while another steadied the pony and pulled at her jacket. They seemed wealthier than the Indians on foot, more like the Indians we'd seen waiting for the helicopter. They had good cameras and more expensive-looking clothing beneath the puffy jackets. They also had walking sticks, pointlessly clasped in one hand.

By now I had no resentment for my fellow pilgrims. I felt at peace with all of it: the mountains, the effort, the heavy breathing, the Indians, the beauty of the valley. Ahead was the next bit of path; that was all that mattered. Fifty steps maybe and then stop to rest again. Fewer when there was an incline. Inside there was a great serenity. The only other emotion that surfaced occasionally was compassion. By mid-afternoon, the Indians walking with me were obviously really suffering; many were trailing their walking sticks behind them, no longer able to lift them. Most were my age but looked like they'd never done anything like this before. They

had simply decided to go on this pilgrimage, now that their children had grown up, presumably with no idea what they were taking on.

Somehow I had caught up with Rory by this point. My memory of the detail is blurred. There must have been another stop at a tea house, as I recall realising he'd been waiting for me there. He looked out for me a lot on that kora.

It was easier with him. I could even manage short conversations, exchanging impressions of what we'd seen while we waited for my breathing to subside and some vitality to return. All the small side valleys entered the main valley higher up, so that their streams dropped as long, thin waterfalls to the valley floor. We reckoned these valleys must have been made by small side glaciers when the main valley was filled to that height with ice. There were regular moraines across the valley; every so often the path would climb over a low ridge of rocks or scree. These must have been left by the retreating glacier. Then there were the rocks themselves. We'd both spotted boulders of conglomerate, rock made of other rocks, as well as a variety of other rock types, igneous and sedimentary. Kailash is an ancient volcano, a plug of once-molten lava which broke through sedimentary layers, melting and transforming them. That was why the sides of the mountain we were looking up at were so straight and black. That would be the igneous core.

Then, of course, there were the flowers. It seems so sweet that such a large man as Rory can get so much enjoyment from such small things. We spotted little stonecrops attached to the sides of rocks, a rosette of tiny trumpet-like yellow flowers coming straight out of the ground with no leaves showing yet, a green cushion straddling several rocks which on close inspection had minute green flowers over its surface. He'd guess the names of some of them. "But I'm not entirely certain of that," and squat down to take close-up photos for later identification.

Rory was with me when we met the young Indian from America sitting on a rock facing down the valley. He called out to us as we came up.

"Hey, you guys speak English?" There was a distinct American twang to his Indian accent.

"Yes."

"How far's the guesthouse?"

"Two hours."

"Shit, it's not!"

"Yeah, it must be."

"Four of our party are dead already."

"What! How can they be dead already?"

"We've got A and B groups. A went yesterday – four of them are dead. They just told us."

He didn't seem that perturbed by this revelation, more fed up with having to wait there for his old relations to come along. He also told us how this was his first visit to India and they'd brought him with them as a special 'treat'. When I asked how many were in their party, he said, "Two hundred and fifty-three. We came in five coaches." They'd driven via Kathmandu, on the same route Ajahn Sumedho's party came on, now tarmacked, up through the Himalayas and across the Tibetan desert.

"What are you doing to hydrate?" he asked. "I've had a Red Bull." When I told him about Roger's advice to drink four litres of water each day to help with the altitude, he said, "They told us nothing like that."

"Did they give you extra days so you could acclimatise to the altitude?"

"Nah. We arrived yesterday." So they'd stopped just two nights at altitude, once at the border and once at Darchen, before starting the kora. No wonder they were all now looking so completely shattered! One dear old lady, short and wearing a pair of flowery trousers and outdoor jacket, was collapsing on her walking stick every hundred yards. No wonder most of those on foot decided to turn back.

Eventually his aunt and uncle, who looked about fifty, came stumbling up the path and sat down beside him. We left him trying to talk to them in Hindi.

Next we reached the bridge which Roger had warned us about.

"Do not miss this. You have to cross there to Dira Puk side. Other pilgrims will go straight on to the guesthouse, but the gompa is on the other side of the river. So you must look for the bridge." And here it was. There was no sign of the gompa, but ahead on our side of the river we could see the large low buildings of the guesthouse, with the Indians trailing slowly towards them. The path beyond ascended the valley side, winding up to Dolma-La.

Over the bridge, we sat down to rest on a boulder beside the river, the clear sparkling water spilling over a rock-strewn bed in front of us. I felt good, although I was very tired. From there we gazed in wonder up at the north face of Kailash, now completely free of cloud. It was so vertical that little snow could find a purchase below the rounded top. Here Kailash was truly magnificent. The jet-black face had just two white streaks crossing it: one rising slightly from left to right and the other dropping steeply from top left to bottom right. We reckoned they must be faults in the igneous rock, creating slight ledges where the snow could settle. Rory pointed out that the same black rock appeared in the mountain to our right on the other side of the valley. So it, too, must be igneous.

Eventually I told Rory to go on. It wasn't far, I told him, and I'd like to sit and enjoy this place. I must have stayed there another hour alone, enjoying gazing at the mountain. A lammergeier came past, a huge vulture with enormous black wings and a white and ochre body, larger than any eagle. With the magnificent mountain backdrop it looked no larger than a crow. It was hunting slowly up the valley, now that the pilgrims had gone, looking for food. Then I realised the clouds were steadily building and that rain might be on its way. So I walked slowly on, my mind silent and at peace, encouraging my reluctant body along the path Rory had taken, climbing slightly up the hillside, stopping after each short stretch. Ahead, the tips of two poles with a few fluttering prayer flags just showed above another moraine. I was overtaken by two Tibetans, city types wearing new trainers and good clothes, walking at what seemed an incredibly fast rate, but what would have been my normal walking pace at home. I followed the path over the low

crest ahead, to find a hillside of small white stupas set in lines across the slope, with the small gompa just beyond. Several squat buildings sat on the slope facing Mount Kailash, two tall poles alongside with lines of fluttering prayer flags tied to the ground.

The cloud was really building behind me now and darkening. I could see rain further down the valley and it was coming my way, but there was not the energy to hurry. I could only walk a hundred yards slowly, then lean on my staff to rest again.

Another stone building came into view, well beneath the gompa, next to the river. The two Tibetans were now walking from the monastery down towards it. That, I reckoned, would be the monastery's guesthouse. Roger had said Dorje should book the best room there – with a view of the mountain. But I wanted to continue to the monastery and pay my respects to the Buddha. I'd had a good day, wisdom had prevailed. Roger had instructed us, "You must stay in your kora," and somehow I had. Despite the physical difficulty, the Indians, and the occasional thoughts of the climb to Dolma-La ahead, I'd managed to enjoy the day.

As I neared the buildings, Ajahn Amaro appeared and gave me a wave. Then he ascended the stone steps leading up to the entrance, taking the twenty or so steps with ease in one go and disappeared from view. When I got there I determined to do the same, as my last valiant effort. 'Arrive with a flourish' was the idea. Somehow I managed to stagger up without stopping, but at the top my head swam so violently I couldn't stand and I collapsed against the wall. When I got up again I had no idea where Ajahn Amaro had gone. I felt like Alice and the White Rabbit.

Tibetan chanting was coming from a small temple across a courtyard of rounded flat boulders. I looked in, but found only a few Tibetan monks performing their evening devotions. So I tried a side room: there I found my companions, each sitting on a bed, with two beds still vacant. One was next to the door, where I stood. The other was under the window opposite. That one, I guessed, had been left so that Ajahn Amaro, next to it, had more space. I said my greetings and set my small day bag down on the bed beside me, then went back to the temple to pay my respects. I

sat leaning against a post, washed in the deep drone of Tibetan chanting.

Two monks led the service, chanting and also occasionally banging cymbals and blowing horns, with two young lads trying to follow along. After half an hour they came to an end, slowing down and fading to a halt like an old 78 record when the power has been turned off. The two lads jumped up immediately and rushed to their shoes at the door, one of which was kicked across the floor, followed by laughter. Teenagers! I got up and followed them out, as the two monks started on another chant. Back in our room I had just enough vitality to realise that no, I didn't have to take the bed by the door. After a day like that I could have the one by the window.

"It is extremely sacred ground; there is a constant merit of one million times because this is, so to say, the amplifier of Kailash power and you will be there still in the month of Saka Dawa, so you have one million times and a hundred thousand times merit. In the period of Saka Dawa they multiply everything by one hundred thousand like this. So it is a very beautiful place to be and I think you have a rest day at Dira Puk, yes?"

"Yes." I had replied to Roger.

"Exactly, so this is also technically correct, because the first day is easy, the second day will be very much more difficult, so that's why I make a rest day so you can enjoy the place on one hand, and those who feel like walking, they can walk into the north face."

Rory and Chris did that, setting off after breakfast to cross another bridge higher up the river, and then making their way up the slope on the opposite side of the valley, well above the big guesthouse the Indians were in. This would take them to an opening into a higher valley that led to the black wall of the north face, with the last remains of the glacier which had once carved the whole valley. All I could manage that morning was to watch them through my window. I did try sitting on the stone veranda after breakfast, but it was all too much: the bright, pale-blue,

cloudless sky; the sparkling-white mountaintop. So I retreated back inside. There, looking at the same view through the old window, of small panes, most of glass but a few replaced with curling plastic and all streaked with dirt and swirls of red from being crudely repainted, the immensity and brightness became manageable. I could lie and gaze out at the serene mountain, with Ajahn Amaro sitting on the bed beside me, stock still, in meditation. We spent the morning together like that.

Breakfast had been in the kitchen, prepared by one of the young novices. Just tea, Tibetan style: black and strong, churned with yak butter and salt, and bowls of tsampa to pour it on. I realised the other young Tibetan was not a novice but a young layman wearing parts of a monk's clothes. He sat beside us, chanting to himself, looking about and occasionally laughing. He obviously had learning disabilities, which explained the kicking of the shoe and the laughter the evening before.

Dorje told us we were welcome to eat our lunch at the monastery or we could cross the valley to buy a meal at the guesthouse. The monastery was vegetarian, he warned us, as the young head of the Kagyu lineage, the Karmapa, had recently prohibited meat. As a result, the monks themselves often ate at the guesthouse. For Ajahn Amaro there was no question – he would stay there for a day of practice. Dhammarakkho did explore the possibility of eating at the guesthouse for the meat, but I wasn't interested.

Later, the disabled young man came into our room to check us out, laughing and poking at some of our things. He seemed harmless. I smiled, Ajahn sat, eyes closed. Once the young man had gone I returned to the view from the window. My mind was at peace, the silence was so strong, it sang, and the mountain opposite was wonderful. Beneath it the Indian pilgrims had set off early from the guesthouse over the river, far more streaming back down the valley than those going up the track leading to Dolma-La. Then I spotted Rory ambling along with his distinctive rolling gait, and then Chris, doing his steady mindful walk. Late morning, Tibetan pilgrims started to appear, coming up the valley, passing

the guesthouse and climbing to the pass; the first a group of teenagers, shouting and mucking about as they went along. Having set off from Darchen before dawn, they would do the whole circuit in a day. But this coming and going of people down below was nothing compared to the power of the mountain above and behind them: most of the time I simply gazed at it with a sense of awe.

Roger had told us what we should do with this view. "The mountain is Chenrezig, with Vajrapani to the right and Manjushri to the left." The two spurs either side of the valley Rory and Chris had entered seemed nearly as high from this perspective at the monastery, creating the sense of three peaks. In Mahayana Buddhism, the principal attributes of the Buddha are represented as three bodhisattvas: Chenrezig represents compassion, Vajrapani power and Manjushri wisdom. "Here you must contemplate the need to balance these forces. If you develop just power in your life you will get envy, or if just intelligence you are not connected to life, so with both you must also develop compassion. But if you are just having compassion it does no good." I did try. But my mind wasn't capable of concepts – even lofty ones. Just serenity.

That afternoon I managed to leave my room and even discovered the cave Roger had told us we must see. It was right behind the monastery's shrine, with a few stone steps leading to a simple rock overhang creating a low shelter. The monastery had been built against the cave. There was even an image of the Buddhist sage he'd told us about, lit by butter lamps. "Eight hundred years ago when Padma Sambhava," who the Kagyu sect looks to as the founder of their tradition, "was undertaking the kora, a great saint, Gotsangpo, appeared as a female white yak, went into this cave, left an imprint, and then he stayed there three years. You can sleep in this cave. I slept there. It is very interesting for the dreams. Extremely powerful, try that. Beside the monastery are also the one thousand Buddhas. You must pay homage here too," (I think they must be the lines of white stupas I passed) "and many other important caves, the monks they will show you. It is extremely sacred…" And so on, including all that

merit: one million times and one hundred thousand, to be accrued. But do you multiply those two or just add them? It would make an extremely large difference.

Much of the religious practice in Tibet reminded me of the west of Ireland. Here, too, there are indentations in bedrock which resemble animal footprints that are given great significance. There is also the belief in 'powerful places' where St Patrick or other saints are said to have been, and in spiritual merit to be gained by difficult religious observances. Twenty years ago, a friend was contracted by Galway County Council to undertake a survey of such local features and their associated lore in Connemara. When the Council sought approval for her first draft, the locals insisted it had to be re-written. She had to remove all the 'it is believed that'. These things were not 'believed', they were facts! But that is changing now, as people become more sophisticated. The younger generation view these stories as superstition, as they do in most of Europe. They are also rejecting the authority of the Catholic Church, until recently as powerful in Ireland as the Buddhist hierarchy was in Tibet.

But that little cave did feel very powerful, as I sat there with the silence resonating. It was once the simple shelter of a respected hermit at the beginning of the second phase of Buddhism where he had practised for years, facing Kailash. It was the equivalent of the monastic islands off Ireland's west coast, which have the same effect on me.

Later I tried to take a walk. Maybe I wasn't up to climbing to the north face of the mountain like Rory and Chris, but surely I could wander further up the main valley if I kept on the flat. I managed only fifty paces before I needed my first rest and I got little further than the two poles with their fluttering prayer flags before I had to give up. There I found a boulder to sit against, in the sun. I could manage that, and from there enjoy the valley around me

With the pilgrims gone, all was at peace. A few clouds were starting to build again, obscuring parts of the mountain. Rory had reckoned this a regular daily cycle. The extra height of Kailash

brought the cloud and showers of rain at the day's end as the air warmed. Further north the mountains were lower and more rounded, like the rest of the Tibetan plateau. There the sky was still blue and the land appeared drier – grey-brown as opposed to the greenish-grey where I sat. Being much more ancient than the youthful Himalayas, those mountains have been worn away. Only Kailash with its igneous core was still mighty enough to create cloud.

A sharp cry and I spotted a marmot standing upright on a slight rise scanning the vicinity before dropping down to graze again. There were others further off once I looked for them. The lammergeier came by again, intently staring at the ground beneath for carrion, or was it bits of food left by pilgrims? I also enjoyed the large patches of lichens on the rocks – dark orange, greys, greens and blacks, all were so striking – while the rock itself was full of shiny dots of mica. I found a sweet, mat-forming plant, reminding me of the living stones of African deserts and how they blend in with their desert environment. Without flowers, it was the same grey as many of the boulders and looked just like one; covered with its tiny white flowers, it simply looked like a white boulder instead. Rory told me, when I asked, "I think it's an Androsace, possibly Androsace tapete, but I'm not a hundred per cent." Alpine gardeners call them Rock Jasmines.

Dhammarakkho passed by, returning from his walk, like a figure from a Lowry painting come to life: stick-like, leaning forward as he walked. He also has a northern accent, calls a spade a spade, and hoards things for later use, which also fits with that poor working man image. He'd given me a short length of old string that morning to repair my water bottle strap. Earlier he'd spotted a problem with my pack and produced a bit of twisted wire to fix it. I sat there enjoying the empty valley until the first of the next batch of Indian pilgrims appeared, then I made my way back to the gompa, followed soon after by Rory and Chris.

Over tea Chris told us, in inspired detail, how he'd climbed up onto the glacier at the base of the north wall to touch the wall itself and how powerful the experience had been. Rory only

managed to comment quietly, "I was transfixed." But later Rory told me that he'd sat there for hours gazing up at the vast wall of black rock above. Rory's not one for hyperbole, but I could see he'd also been deeply affected. He was happy also that he'd found his first mosses in Tibet – he's very fond of mosses.

Everyone enjoyed our day of rest except perhaps poor Appamado, who still had a severe migraine. He took it easy that day in the hope it might pass, but it was still just as bad by evening. I summoned all my remaining vitality to give his shoulders and neck a massage, knowing that this helps Mich with her migraines. He said it helped, but then he would. He's that kind of chap.

It must have been that evening that we took the group photo, standing together on the veranda with Mount Kailash behind us. It was taken by Dorje. Then Rory took one with Dorje standing beside the three monks. The same backdrop is in the American slideshow: with Iwana and Lori, along with Marline, wearing white silk khatas again and standing either side of an impressive-looking Tibetan monk. Presumably that's the abbot who was away in Lhasa for our visit. There's no picture of Ajahn Sumedho though. The monks didn't cross the valley to visit the monastery from their second campsite; John Levy told me they'd found the first two days really difficult.

At lunchtime we asked Dorje to arrange a meeting with the two Tibetan monks so we could thank them for their generosity. We ate earlier than them because of the Theravadan rules: small lumps of pasta looking like gnocchi, covered in dried cheese and rancid butter, with the option of salt or sugar. The rest of us struggled to eat it, but Dhammarakkho wolfed down two platefuls, commenting "full of protein!" Dorje arranged the meeting for that evening in the shrine room, but only one of the Tibetan monks came and after Ajahn Amaro had made a little speech about how thankful we all were for their hospitality, and just as Dorje was starting to translate, the monk started a tape of the evening chanting and joined in. We sat there politely for fifteen minutes and then left. Maybe it was simply a misunderstanding, or his shyness, or maybe they just got to meet too many pilgrims.

Later they broke off from their devotions to rush outside to watch a helicopter arriving to deliver a Chinese film crew to the guesthouse opposite. At least we all did that together.

They might have been shy but as Roger said, "This is a kind monastery. The monks will look after you. If you want to sleep in the cave they will come to find you and bring blankets." They certainly took care of us: giving us the best room, one of them bringing my binoculars which I'd left outside. I think also of the disabled teenager they'd taken in, and how they found me in the night, as Roger predicted, when I moved to the shrine room in front of the cave.

I was there because I still couldn't sleep. If anything, at the higher altitude my nights were more wakeful, with intense waves of energy and restlessness, so that I felt even more trapped – unable to move too much for fear of disturbing the others. I took myself outside, sat for a while in meditation in the shrine room, then lay down. There one of the monks found me and took me to another bedroom. At first I thought I had it to myself, but then he joined me at the other end of the room, to then receive a lengthy phone call from, I suspect, a female friend.

The next night I resolved to put up with my original room. I lay there, trying to hold my mind in a non-reactive space while listening to the snoring and heavy breathing of my companions, holding the need to move yet again; not wanting to disturb, yet restless. I managed it this time by taking breaks to play a game on my mobile phone, under the covers so the light wasn't obvious. I'd bought this phone especially for the trip as it had a seven-day battery, to use as a voice recorder. There were two games on it I hadn't been able to remove. Now I was pleased they were still there. From then on, I spent part of every night shooting down little coloured balls. It became my night-time solace for the rest of the trip. Not very spiritual, but I'd long given that notion up. It was now about survival.

I knew that the next day would be the hardest, with the climb over the Dolma-La pass. Dorje had been concerned about me at breakfast, suggesting I should go back down the valley instead,

along with the defeated Indians. I'd assured him I could manage; I'd been taking the previous day easily, so I could enjoy it. Forever the optimist, I really thought with a day of rest I'd manage the pass. So we'd made a deal. I'd start an hour earlier than the others, before first light. Dorje felt much happier with that. And we also agreed that the rest of the group wouldn't wait for me at the top. The only place for the monks to eat was on the other side – I didn't want them missing their food through waiting for me.

But now I knew I could hardly walk on the flat, so how was I going to get up to the pass in the morning? At least I wouldn't have the extra pressure of my companions all waiting at the top. I'd repeated that several times, assuring everyone that I'd manage, I just didn't want to have to hurry. That proved to be very wise. If I'd thought they were waiting at the top I'm certain I would have died.

9Beyond Thought

Made it!! Long gasp. Here! Long gasp. I collapse onto a boulder with another long gasp. Sit leaning forward on the staff; large, long, greedy breaths; head spinning. I look up. In front of me the others are doing something. Building. I'd know what if my mind could formulate the concepts. Instead all I do is stare. Good enough. No need to know.

What is actually happening: Chris, Ajahn Amaro and Dhammarakkho have assembled a small pile of boulders. They are now tying clear plastic bags to it using a long shoelace. There are photos in the bags: Ajahn Chah, a two-year-old girl standing in a field, and some clothing. Ajahn Amaro is reverently placing a small oblong metal box held in a silk khata on a flat stone set at the front. Then they stand together, hands held together in prayer, and the monks chant. Rory's further back, his large black camera held to his face, taking photos.

Must try to stand to join them. I tense my legs, pull on the staff. Can't. Sit back. More heavy breathing. Chest very painful. I wait through the chanting. Try again. This time I manage to stand. Head swimming. The chant ends.

Where we are: Shiwal Tsal, 'the place of death', at the base of the main ascent to Dolma-La. The boulder-strewn mountainside is covered in clothing: a red-and-white jumper pulled over a nearby boulder, a white hat sitting on another, a bright-yellow jumper spread-eagled on the ground. Everything placed deliberately. The most spectacular: a boulder further off wearing a white shirt under a striped, multicoloured, sleeveless cardigan. There are also the scattered remnants of offerings from previous years between the

boulders. All of this is dotted across the slope as everyone has chosen their own special place or boulder. The slope looks, if anything, like the leftovers of a vast outdoor jumble sale.

But this is a famous place, and of great power, overseen by the most important Tibetan tantric deity, Vajrayoni. Hers is the cairn at the top of the slope, just above us, cocooned in prayer flags. Here the pilgrim discards some possession to represent the renouncing of attachment to worldly objects and to this very life. It can be a piece of clothing, a lock of hair, or some valued object. It is done here, partway up to Dolma-La, because it is here where the climb starts to get difficult for everyone, even the Tibetans.

So this is where my companions had decided to leave the special items they'd brought with them. The watch Ajahn Amaro's mother gave to his father on their wedding day, inscribed with his name. That was in the little metal box. Dhammarakkho's young daughter's dress: the clothing in the plastic bag. She'd died at Chithurst Monastery in a freak car fire. This was her favourite dress. Chris had brought his great-grandmother's thimble.

For the pilgrim, the climb over Dolma-La represents death. The ascent at an altitude where breathing becomes increasingly difficult can render the whole experience transformative. The struggle upwards with one's faculties decreasing, the sense of release on reaching the pass and then the joyous descent to another life. It is a powerful analogy for both Tibetan Buddhists and Indian Hindus. All our party had read and heard descriptions. Ajahn Sucitto had made much of it in a presentation he gave us of his pilgrimage at Amaravati. It was an inspiring idea. But I started the climb in the state most people encounter on the final stretch. Just getting to Shiwal Tsal had been all I could focus on. In fact, it had been my sole focus: to get to this site and to this ceremony. I couldn't imagine how I'd then get over the pass. But by leaving one hour earlier, surely I could make it in time for their ceremony.

I had set off just after six, Chinese time, using the small torch on my mobile phone to find my way down the track which led to the bridge. The mountaintops were lit by starlight, but I could discern little in front, beyond the light of my torch. I'd scanned the

route the previous afternoon using my binoculars, from my boulder in the sun. Dorje said I should cross the bridge, then follow a small path climbing the slope opposite to join the main pilgrim path further up. I thought I could discern it winding through the boulders. But when I got there, my little torch wasn't powerful enough and I hadn't the energy for searching. All I could do was start up the moderate incline ahead. Everything had come down to the simplicity of managing the next moment.

Through boulders: fifteen paces then stop. Lean on top of staff. Heavy breathing. Peer ahead, make out a route between the next few boulders. Hope they aren't going to close in. Couldn't climb over them. Another fifteen paces. Stop. Rest again on the staff. To the right: lights of the guesthouse. All sound drowned out by the roar of a small river, somewhere that way. Start again. Find my way between boulders again.

And so I went on, light slowly coming to the sky, the mountain above brightening, until there was light enough to make out more detail. I'd gone far enough by then that the dark shapes of Indian pilgrims setting out from the guesthouse were now behind me, crossing what must be a bridge over the river, its water reflecting the sky. Eventually I came through the boulders to the track. By then the first of the Indian pilgrims had already passed, showing me where it was. The main track was some three metres wide, cleared of boulders, and in places cut into the slope or with sides built up with rocks. Walking on it was easier but the slope was slightly steeper.

Now down to twelve paces before resting. The path even underfoot. Good to leave the boulders. Pilgrims around me walking. They leave me behind each time I stop. Try to do a few more than twelve paces, inspired by the even ground. But too winded, I have to sit down. Return to twelve paces. The first touch of pink appears on the mountaintop above. Black hairy yaks, each laden with two blue plastic barrels slung in cloth harnesses either side, amble beside the track. Tibetan owners herding them from behind. My fellow pilgrims, all Indian, are finding the climbing hard too.

The slope steepens. It's only for a few hundred metres to the top but it seems an enormous distance to me. Then above to my left is Dorje walking along with the others following behind. So that's where the path from the monastery ran. I will myself up the slope, wanting to be at the top for when they get there. I don't manage it. But I'm not long behind and Rory waits for me to ask if I'm OK. Yes, just have to take it easy.

From there the path is nearly flat, running through a small stony valley with large patches of snow and a meandering river. This is much easier: I can manage twenty or even twenty-five paces here before stopping. I'm now surrounded by Indians. There is a lovely woman about my age who is absolutely determined. She is wearing a pair of trainers too big for her, one of which squeaks. One plodding step, then another plodding step with a squeak. She has one hand behind her back, her head leant forward, just focused on the path ahead.

I come upon Ajahn Amaro sitting beside the path contemplating the view. I stop, leaning on my staff to share a few words between heavy breaths. I don't dare sit beside him as it would take too long to stand again. The slopes around us are streaked with snow. Kailash just shows above one of them. He sets off. I try to follow but can't manage his pace. From then on I'm just intent on trying to keep up, somehow. Keep him in sight. I can see splodges of colour on the steeper slope ahead with the line of pilgrims passing up it. So I know that must be Shiwal Tsal where the ceremony will take place. I try not to take in the steep climb beyond, up to Dolma-La, which the first of the pilgrims are now ascending. The few times I do my mind reels: How could I possibly manage that! It's best not to look.

At their ceremony I'm so tired from the effort of getting there I can hardly manage to leave the possession of mine I'd planned to relinquish. My old hat. As they depart I place it on a boulder and give it the slightest of nods. Then, just before he too sets off, I point it out to Rory, for a photo. Once it had been so significant. I expect leaving everything dear to us, when we die, will come down to this.

Looking now at the photo Rory took of my old hat, I get a pang of grief. That hat really was the thing I was most fond of. Recognising how upset I got whenever I mislaid it, I decided: this is what should be left on Kailash. It's a green-and-white knitted cotton balaclava which I'd wear as a round hat. I'd found it in the Drakensberg Mountains ten years before, in an area without any other sign of humans having visited. No paths, nothing else made by man. But there it was, sitting on a rock. I was climbing up to the Lesotho border on a four-day hike from the little Buddhist centre where I was spending a few weeks, before returning to Chithurst Monastery to undertake a three-month retreat. Since then I'd woven so many mythologies around that hat.

It was with me the next day on the edge of the Lesotho upland plateau as I searched frantically for the path back down, away from the massive thunderstorm building above me. The path led to the shelter of a cave I'd been warned I had to get to no later than one o'clock to avoid the lightning. People were killed each year by strikes during this season so I was desperate. I'd sworn then that if I found the cave, I'd take the three-month retreat really seriously: no speaking, no going for walks in the woods around where I was staying – I could walk round the hut for exercise. Just in time, I found the path down and reached the cave as cracks of thunder broke above me. Then I'd worn the hat through the winter months of that powerful retreat in the forest. Spinning it across the room to see if I could land it on a coat peg each time I came indoors. If I managed it, the day's meditation would invariably go well. After the retreat I called it my magic hat. I became very fond of it, wearing it every time I went walking. It went to the Alps, to the Pyrenees with Ajahns Sumedho and Sucitto, to the Tatras, on the long road north in England with Ajahn Amaro, and on the St Paul's Way in Anatolia. And each time I accidentally left it somewhere: panic. Oh, where's my hat!

But on Kailash any sense of possession was beyond my capabilities, even the concept of 'hat'. There: green-and-white thing. I stayed sitting staring like that for a long time after the others had left. I'd again assured them I could make it. I just had to

go slow. I didn't want to feel I had to keep up so they were not to wait for me. By the time I was able to start again, there was no sign of them.

Ajahn Sumedho struggled equally up this climb. He was sixty-eight and had done none of the training we'd given him for the previous attempt. In the slides showing him walking the first two days of the kora he looks ashen-faced and exhausted. In those showing this climb he is being helped by a middle-age Tibetan man wearing monastic colours, and John Levy's son, Alex. For the steepest bit, the one I was now facing, they are each holding an elbow and lifting him up. John told me on the phone how happy Alex had been to help like that, while Hal told me more about the Tibetan. "At the start, it was John and his son who were with him, but then these Tibetans recognised that Sumedho was some kind of holy man and they just had to help him. There was this one guy who just wouldn't leave him. I was up above looking down to see if Sumedho was OK and this guy was so obviously going to get him up that mountain; lifting him up the boulders and all. He stayed with him right till Sumedho was seated at the top. Don't think he said a darn thing. That was really something."

There was no such help for me; I had to climb that slope alone. It had now come down to five steps and I could hardly lift my staff, but I was so glad I had it. The one time I tried sitting down it took forever to get up again, and once up, I felt no better than when I'd sat – worse, if anything. Resting on the staff, staring at the ground ahead, body wracked with each breath, each stop seemed to go on forever, before I could manage to start again. Not that I had any concept of time, just the will to go on.

The Indians on ponies and the yaks had passed long before, then those Indian pilgrims able to climb. Now it was just me and the slowest, all of them either elderly or very overweight, or their companions. There were a dozen or so, all being helped by Sherpa or Tibetan guides, elbows held to lift them. One woman had two Sherpas nearly carrying her up. With their help, even these slowest of the Indians were leaving me behind.

A few Tibetan families doing the whole kora were now passing.

Even they were stopping occasionally for gasped breaths before going on. Father carried most of the luggage, while mother guided the children up, one holding her four-year-old daughter's hand as she dutifully toddled along. Grandparents would struggle at the back of each group. One grandpa, finding it really hard, was twenty or so paces behind. He doubled right forward each time they stopped, never catching up to the rest of his family. Only when they started again would he unbend and struggle on.

The next and steepest part of that climb I still have seared on my memory. Not that I felt any suffering at the time – I wasn't capable of conceiving of that. It's the body's memory I now have of how close I was to death. I had no sense of breathing oxygen, even from the longest deepest breath, and my chest ached horribly. By now I was nearly alone on the mountainside, only the Indian woman with the two Sherpas above me. They were lifting her up each step by holding the back of her jeans. Another Sherpa stood beside them with a small tank of oxygen and mask. I stared up at the little tank of oxygen, but that's all I could manage – to stare. I couldn't even conceive what was wrong – but on a somatic level the body knew that the pain in my chest was important. I had to be careful. Then, just a few steps further on, they had gone. I was trailing my staff now for the two or three steps I could manage before stopping. Unable to lift it, it would come bumping over the rocks behind me.

Breath, blankness. Breath. Try to lift a leg again. Really painful chest. Really painful! Stop. Breath. Wait. The pain in the chest subsides slightly. There is the sense of a memory: someone wanting me to come back. Yes, I must not die. But it feels so close. Nurse myself up. Slowly. There's no fear. Just compassion. For them, for me. Nursing this body up the slope. Never pushing, but never giving in. Endless.

Was it an hour like that? I've no idea. The steep slope was somehow eventually surmounted and a field of boulders lay ahead, on a gentler slope with large patches of snow.

A land of white snow and black rock. I can't see the pass but it can't be far now. Two Tibetans are moving through the boulders

doing full-length prostrations, leaving two parallel trails through each patch of snow. Here I can take a few more steps and shorter stops. Not that I can catch up to the Tibetans doing the prostrations. Another Tibetan family come by and then a group of young Westerners in outdoor gear, wearing scarves tied round their heads.

I sit on a boulder. After ten minutes of staring at the ground I can look up and around. There's a rising cliff of rock and snow to my right. I'm higher than most of the peaks in the distance. So it really can't be far. I feel so weak and my chest hurts even sitting here on the boulder. But I've survived.

Two snowcocks fly by, a whirr of white and brown. My brain can't manage the name or the memory of Rory having reported them the day before, only acknowledgment. Getting up, I'm alone again. But then, eventually, there is the pass ahead: a vast swirling field of colour with people sitting amongst it. I manage much of the last hundred metres, which is nearly flat, in one go and collapse against a prayer flag-covered boulder. There are people, what sounds like Russian being spoken, a young Tibetan mother beside me suckling her baby. That's all I can take in for a long time, that and all the colour.

Eventually I can start to think again and I look around. Prayer flags are everywhere, spiralling out from a central pole, draped over boulders, flowing down the hill side, so many layers where I sit that it feels like comfortable carpet, both underneath me and against the boulder I lean on. Some dozen Tibetans sit about in small groups, chatting, smiling at me when they catch my eye. The Russians are assembling to leave on one side, an older guy talking to the rest who look in their twenties, their scarf-covered heads nodding in understanding. Beyond are the mountains: Kailash on one side, other lower mountains beyond.

I am here! I've made it! This has been the sole aim of the last nine hours of incredibly slow climbing. But there is no sense of release, no joy of achievement. Nothing, not even relief. Just a numbed acceptance that it was over. And a promise that I would never, ever, do anything like that again.

I'd brought a line of prayer flags with me, rolled in a small ball in my pack; on each one I'd written in black felt tip the name of a friend or a wish for someone or something of benefit to others. Some had been requests. Others I'd added. I struggle to my feet and manage to tie one end to the main pole and pull it across to a big boulder, tying the other end to more prayer flags. My line of flags hangs only just off the ground, but it'll have to do. I take a photo with my mobile phone and sit back down against my rock to recover from the effort. Ten minutes later a group of young Tibetans arrive and walk all over my flags, trampling them into the mat of others, while tying their own flags much higher and better than I'd managed.

By now it was nearly three, Chinese time, and I realised, as I recovered, that in fact I wasn't so much tired as simply suffering the effect of altitude with anything I tried to do. But I was really, really, hungry. I'd been running on empty for hours without realising it. From here I knew the path descended steeply to a tea house where I could eat. I should be fine going down. And the valley was lower than the one I'd left, with a gentle gradient downhill all the way to the monastery where we were staying. Now I felt I could make it, but I also knew how long the rest of the day's walk was. Ajahn Sucitto had warned us. He'd arrived at their camp just before dark and utterly exhausted. So I had to get on. Although I had a torch, I didn't want to worry my companions. I wanted to get there before dark.

Hal went through something similar with Ajahn Sumedho.

"On the top I wanted to take pictures and stuff – that pass was really some place to hang out," he told me over the phone. "And Sumedho wanted to rest. But I felt great. I'd trained some for the trek, so I was fine. So I waited as the others went on. When he was ready to go there was just John Levy's son left, who helped us down a few difficult rocks. Then he went on and I was the only one left with Sumedho. He was real tired. As we'd say out West, he was leaking a little oil. So I was holding his hand, keeping him upright. We'd walk about a hundred yards, then he'd have to sit down and we'd rest and maybe talk a bit and then he'd get up and

walk some. That was fine to start with. I figured the Tibetan guides would come back soon. But we'd walk and Sumedho was just so tired. I was taking it real easy and waiting for their help. But nobody showed up, nobody showed up to help us! All the guides had just gone on to do their thing at the camp, or whatever, and I was up there with him on my own."

"No Tibetan pilgrims?"

"We weren't the last off the pass, but the rest overtook us as we started down the other side. Even Pannasaro, his assistant, had taken off. He'd been with Sumedho all the time up till then, but he was really hurting. He had fever blisters and he was in a lot of pain, you know, so he wouldn't have been a whole lot of help. So yeah, we ended up alone on the trail.

"Eventually, I was just steaming inside," he explained. "Where are those guys? Why are they leaving the revered monk out here by himself? Some guide should have stayed with us! In the army, they used to call it the drag, the guy that brought up the rear. Then it was really starting to get late…"

"How long was this?"

"I dunno, six, maybe seven hours in all we were on the trail together. After I'd been steaming, then I was really starting to think he might die on me as well. I was thinking 'Ajahn Sumedho, I don't want you to die.' I mean I could have carried him, I was still healthy and feeling OK, but I couldn't have got too far. And I was thinking, maybe soon I'm going to have to leave him and go get help. He was just so weak and looked awful. But he just kept on moving step by step, holding my hand. With me praying he was not going to die on me. So I was at a point there when I was just boiling inside, really boiling with it all – where were these guides? And then Ajahn Sumedho looked over at me and he said, 'Isn't this beautiful! Isn't this mountain just incredible, what a wonderful, wonderful, experience' and he was just about collapsed, nearly dead. That moment was the most brilliant teaching moment I've ever experienced! In the face of all that adversity, he found the joy of being on Mount Kailash and all I found was anger. For that one moment, that whole trip was worth it. It was a gold mine."

"And your anger collapsed?"

"Yeah, that anger went right away," and Hal laughs a lot on the phone at the memory. "Then it was fine. I was still concerned, but it was how it was, just us two going down the trail bit by bit. I remember him saying later on. 'You know Hal, there's a lot of merit in helping an old monk like this.'"

"Eventually, it was nearly dark, I could hardly see the trail. Fortunately it was a clear sky so the light from the stars helped, and well, when we were only about three hundred yards from the camp, the Tibetan guides came rushing back and took him. Two or three guys helped Sumedho into camp, making a fuss of him. But by that time it didn't really matter, we'd made it."

Somehow I made it too before dark, just like them, step by step. For me the light was just enough to discern Rory looking out for me on a rise just before the gompa. But my companions weren't worried, even though it was well past nine, Chinese time. They'd known I was coming as Dorje had asked another guide to call him on his mobile when I passed. He was with the Ukrainian party (not Russian), which was camped two hours further up the valley.

I felt happy – the first time since I'd set out to climb Dolma-La early the previous morning – and I was sitting on a rock outcrop looking down the remainder of the valley. Here the valley sides were no longer mountains, more rounded downs. Ahead the river cut into the valley's floor, dropping into a small gorge, exposing bedrock and I was enjoying the incredible variety of rock colours: crimson, light mauve, green and a mauve so dark it was virtually black, amidst the usual dark reddish-brown. In the distance, the valley opened onto a wide hazy plain. From here Ajahn Sucitto had been inspired by the sight of Lake Manasarovar and the distant Himalayas. Peering through my binoculars, I could just make out what might be distant water, but no mountains. Still, just to be alive and happy was wonderful.

I'd found this spot by taking a faint side path, away from the Indians. I could now see a long line of them in the distance: blobs

of red on brown ponies following the track which took to the valley side to avoid the gorge. I could hear others passing: ponies clip clopping, bells tinkling, occasional snatches of Hindi conversation. But none came this way. None to defecate or to discard the rubbish that littered the main trail. Only the occasional Tibetan porter or Nepali guide would choose this lesser route, so as to keep the pile of mani stones, carved with the holy mantra, respectfully to their right. Each would salute me, perhaps mumble a prayer to the stones and pass on, back to the main track.

The night before I'd slept for the first time; lain my head on the pillow and actually fallen straight asleep. It lasted three hours and felt like taking a long thirst-quenching draught. I woke in the night refreshed, went outside and sat in meditation beside the monastery's large copper prayer wheel, wrapped in my sleeping bag. I was there for two hours. First experiencing all over again the discomfort, the sense I was so close to dying. When that had passed, there was a great peace. Eventually I lay on my side and fell asleep where I was.

I woke later in the night with the memory of being on the mountainside and knowing I had to return. Now I could also remember why. Two of the women who came regularly for meditation had made a point of asking me to come back, after the last group evening sitting. Then, as they left, Mich had turned to me and said she, too, wanted me to come back. Recalling it, tears gently rolled down my cheeks in the cold night air.

For the previous evening's walk, I'd had the valley to myself but not this capacity to enjoy it. I welcomed catching up with the Sherpa guides, who were helping the last Indian woman; chatting to them kept me going. For me, there'd been no sense of release once I was over Dolma-La pass; the idea of the descent as a birth into a new life felt like a rather nasty joke. I've since read that it's the same for mountaineers climbing the higher Himalayan peaks without oxygen bottles. The body is unable physiologically to supply the 'high' of achievement without enough oxygen. So for

me, there was only the need to get down and then the long, exhausted trudge down the valley.

The guides were from the same high Nepalese valleys as Indra, our guide in Humla. There were four of them, two helping the woman, coaxing her up whenever she collapsed again, and two more, including the leader, walking ahead, stopping every so often to wait. The leader told me how difficult they found the Indians. "They are only thinking of themselves. Like this woman. We try to get her to take a horse, no, she will not. We say she can have one free, no. So we have to carry her up the mountain. On other side, again we offer horse, no! All the time she says, 'It does not matter if I die. I am close to God.' But she's not close to God. She is just selfish!"

He also told me, "They shout orders as if they are owning us. There is not proper respect. We are just servants. And they are so dirty. Dropping their rubbish: cans, food bags, bottles, on the path, just like that." He pointed at two drinks cans we were passing. "And they take a shit right next to the path, where everyone can see them. Not behind the rocks."

The Indian woman eventually made unnecessary work for the Chinese, too: as night fell, they sent an ambulance up the valley to collect her. By then the head guide and I had walked on, leaving the others with her. As we walked, he told me that other Indian tour companies were worse than the one he worked for. To save money, they employed Tibetan guides. "They have no Hindi and the Indians no Tibetan, so the Indians get no advice about how to be in the mountains." The two Indians (not four) who had died the day before had been with one of these groups, he told me. Now they would be buried on the mountain at the place for dead pilgrims, beside Shiwal Tsal, where the clothes are left.

When I'd relayed all this to the others next morning over breakfast, Ajahn Amaro added that a guide had commented to him on how stupid the Indians were going round Kailash on a pony. "How can that do good for you?"

But for me, that morning at least, the Indians were simply what they were – I found pleasure in everything, even the inane

questions from the fat ones on the ponies.

The last of the Indians were clambering onto their blue Chinese coaches, including a party I'd passed earlier: a group of young men led by a middle-aged guy wearing a bandana. Then he'd been making a dramatic speech in Hindi with sweeping hand gestures. He now gave them another, facing out from the coach's first step, before they all clambered on board. Then the coaches pulled away, trailing dust clouds, as I headed west, along the pilgrim path which had turned to follow the mountain's southern flank back to Darchen. The Tibetans, now riding their ponies again, trotted ahead, bells tinkling. I watched them into the distance, trailing steadily smaller dust clouds. Also way ahead were the returning porters, most having left their loads, and amongst them I could make out my companions.

The vast plain to my left featured the odd distant group of grazing yaks, and beyond them was Lake Manasarovar, now discernible by eye. Hills rose one side of the lake, white-topped mountains to the other, and way off, the thin, white, jagged line of the Himalayas across the horizon. It was an impressive sight, marred only by the new Chinese visitor centre, with its giant concrete billboard.

Today was just a half day's walking. But the day before I'd been walking for more than fifteen hours, so that morning I got steadily more tired, until even the occasional slight rise in the path would bring me to a halt, exhausted, any sense of enjoyment now completely gone. Peering ahead, Darchen seemed a dusty mirage that never got any nearer, with no sign of the others.

For the last hour a herd of yaks ambled slowly behind me, encouraged along by the whistles and grunts of several Tibetans, but still stopping to take munches of grass. Even so, they steadily gained on me. I was now so shattered I had to stop often.

The yaks actually helped, shooing me along the road. But then an empty tourist coach approached, tooting its horn, and we all had to move aside. When I restarted I was surrounded by them. So

I came into Darchen amidst a herd of yaks, passing empty Tibetan houses with boarded windows, probably designated by the Chinese for demolition as another hotel site. Over a bridge I turned down the main street and left the yaks to amble on.

I had no idea where my companions were, so I was looking for our mini-bus. The main street had several, all white, it being the standard Chinese model. No, not this one: too new. No not that one, wrong luggage, and so on until I'd reached the hotel building sites on the edge of town. There I had to turn back, and walk, very slowly, back up the hill. My companions would be eating somewhere as it was nearly midday, but where? Back at the crossroads, I stood lost and exhausted. Then, thank God, a truck pulled away and there was our mini-bus.

Go over. Find the driver. He understands. Follow him to a Chinese restaurant behind shops. Dorje and the others are sitting round a table filled with bowls of Chinese food, eating. There are hellos. Sit down. Queries that I'm OK. Yes. But I'm far too tired to eat. A bowl of rice is placed in front of me. Far, far, too tired. I just look at it, at them eating. I'm too thirsty, too. I drink, which feels better. But I still I can't eat. So I watch as my favourite dishes are finished off by my companions, one by one. But who cares. The walking is finally over.

Manasarovar is a vast blue lake, turquoise blue in places, varying to cobalt blue, depending on one's angle, the time of day and depth of water. The sky above is clear, very pale blue, and only the mountains surrounding it have touches of cloud, occasionally a thicker wodge, like today. Three mountains on the distant far side look like they might have rain.

I am sitting by the shore with my back leaning against a boulder – to my right is the immense looking Gurla Mandhata, regarded by the Hindus as another holy mountain. It's higher, more massive, and covered in more snow, but it doesn't stand alone like Kailash; it's an outlier of the main Himalayan range. The range forms a jagged white frieze to the left of Gurla Mandhata with

banks of cloud beyond where Nepal must be. The land before the Himalayan ridge is lower, rounded, rolling, streaked with patches of snow yet to melt from last winter. Further around the lake shore, the land rises to become rounded mountains on the lake's opposite, far side – including those with the cloud today.

The bird life on the lake is constant. During the several hours I've been sitting contemplating the vast blueness, something has always been happening: rufus shelducks dabbling further along the shore; bar-headed geese flying by, honking; great-crested grebes muttering out on the water; or waders picking their way along the water line. All this activity is peripheral, though. The bird life is feeding on the water weed growing in the shallows, the detritus from it or the insect life living on it. Out there, where the water is deeper, darker, it is undisturbed. That's where my gaze rests.

I thought I spotted a few merganser further out – they dive for fish – but realised I was wrong. Maybe there are few fish in such a cold body of water. The lake is certainly not fished by man. For the Tibetans it would be a sacrilege to fish such a holy lake. No boats are allowed to disturb its surface.

The lake receives acts of devotion, however. Along its shore are assemblages of stones: cairns, small mani walls, flat stones placed one upon another to make little towers. In caves and overhangs on the low cliffs the rock walls are incised with mantras. On the first day of our stay there, I climbed slowly up to those caves thinking I might sleep in one, inspired by the idea of the hermits who'd once lived there, but opted that night instead for the simplicity of erecting my tent near the shore. There wasn't much sleep though; the effect of the altitude allowed me only an hour, but outside, at least I could sit and watch the lake under starlight.

Three days we have been here, much of it I've spent sitting or walking by Manasarovar. I see the others occasionally: Rory heading off to explore the nature, Dhammarakkho out walking, Appamado sitting by the lake, near to where we are staying. Ajahn Amaro spends most of the time meditating in their room, while Chris left early this morning to walk as far as he can round the

lake and then return. He'd wanted to undertake the kora of the lake, or at least part of it, as Roger had suggested we might, staying in the gompas on its shore, but the others weren't interested, and I wouldn't have been able. He had so much energy, he told us, and wanted to use it to do his absorbed walking. All I could manage were short bursts, and at each seated stop spending another long period contemplating the lake.

I too was forced to give up a desire to the group dynamic: when we'd arrived I'd wanted to stay in Chiu Gompa. After all, we carried a message and gifts from the abbot of Yalbang Monastery for his disciple, Lama Songu, who lived at the gompa. I felt we should visit there first and see if we were invited to stay, but the others wanted the comfort of the guesthouse by the shore. The compromises of enforced group travel could be vexing. I was now breaking Dorje's rule about that by sneaking out with my tent and sleeping bag when he wasn't looking.

Our Tibetan guesthouse, along with a few others, faced Manasarovar. There was also a large Indian dharamsala, a pilgrimage hostel with tattered posters on its outside wall advertising past pilgrimages. "Special Spiritual Yatra to Protect Mother Earth. Kailash and Manasarovar 17th July 2012. Universal Peace Sanctuary. Bangalore," with a smiling Guru before the holy mountain. Behind the guesthouse a few recently built small hotels lined the road. The whole place reminded me of a small English seaside resort, circa 1950 – out of season.

Occasionally a coachload of Indians would arrive, noisily light a fire on the shore beside the guesthouse and perform some kind of ceremony, with lots of photos being taken. They would come and go in an hour or two, though, leaving the place quiet again. None stayed in the sleepy dharamsala.

We climbed up to Chiu Gompa the morning after we'd settled into the hostel, Dorje leading the way, me trailing behind again. Dorje even came back down to where I was stopped, breathing heavily. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. Please go on. I'll catch you up."

The crag above was adorned with several square, monastic-

coloured buildings, two stupas of piled stones on top and fluttering prayer flags everywhere. As I surmounted the last of the climb, gasping heavily, the rest of the group were making their way along a stone-flagged path with a small outer wall on the side of the crag, and disappearing via a few cut steps around a rock outcrop. I caught up with them visiting a cave. I'd missed the explanation again, but guessed this must be another cave used by some saint in the past. The principal image behind the fluttering butter lamps seemed to be Guru Rinpoche, as Padma Sambhava is also known.

Outside, a Tibetan man in early middle age wearing semi-monastic clothing stood waiting. Is this Lama Songu, I wondered, trying to behave with respect in case it was. But no, when Dorje came out we moved on. The steps wound round and up the rock face arriving at a chapel built directly above the cave. Another Tibetan appeared, much older, with grey hair tied in a ponytail and wispy beard, again wearing monastic-coloured maroon-and-yellow top, this time combined with a pair of natty grey pinstriped trousers. He looked like the result of the game where everyone draws a different portion on folded paper which is then opened out: wild hermit, Tibetan monk and city banker.

So, was this crazy dude Lama Songu? No, he directed Dorje on, to another chapel further round the crag. Steps cut in the rock led up, down and around. As we circled the crag the view was changing. We'd started looking out over Lake Manasarovar; now we were looking at a wider and higher hill than we were on with a large red radio mast on top (which Dorje had already warned us we must not climb up to). Below us, between the two hills, was a stream bed and the road leading to our guesthouse, while beyond the mast was the white top of Gurla Mandhata. Further round we could see a village nestled on our hill's flank, a dozen or so flat-roofed houses with the road running past and a worn path leading up to the crag. Beyond them was a wide plain, slightly green in colour, with a thin line of meandering marshy land leading to a distant second large lake: Rakshas Tal, the black lake, also holy but a place of dark forces. Small herds of yak grazed on the plain.

Then we were descending to another chapel, larger and more modern than the previous one, from which we could hear chanting. Beside it was the main entrance to the gompa with a dusty road leading from the main body of the hill, of which the crag was a promontory.

The chanting stopped and another 'monk' emerged from the chapel, but far too young. When Dorje again asked, he was told Lama Songu lived in the buildings opposite. Across, on the main hill, two homesteads were each contained in a compound wall; to their right was a large white stupa and rising behind and above them all, gazing on us benignly, was Kailash: not just its familiar black-and-white summit but also the top part of its snow-covered flanks. If this crag had not once had a venerable hermit living in a cave, you'd need to invent one, the site felt so powerful.

Lama Songu's house, the outbuildings and the compound's wall were made of grey mud as were the flat roofs supported by timbers poking out the side. A dog barked in the dusty yard bringing a middle-aged woman, dressed traditionally, from the house. She showed us through to the main room. There, Lama Songu, in his seventies with grey pigtail tied in a knot and beaming a welcoming smile, was delighted to meet us. He was also delighted to meet Buddhist monks and then thrice delighted when we produced the letter from his teacher, Pema Riksal Rinpoche. He couldn't stop wanting to do things for us: making Tibetan tea using an ancient electric blender he connected by two wires to a car battery to produce the best buttered tea I'd ever tasted; picking things up from around the room to show us and announcing that he'd have all the chapels open for our use whenever we wanted while we were staying in the guesthouse. Ajahn Amaro tried to offer a traditional khata, but he would have none of that and kept pouring the tea. Then he offered us all khatas – very good quality silk ones.

While all this was going on, I was taking in the amazing assortment of Buddhist and non-Buddhist objects in his room. The small shrine was filled to overflowing with brass images, votive bowls and photos; the largest was of his teacher, Pema Riksal

Rinpoche. The TV set beside it was topped with an old-fashioned motorcycle helmet plus a half-eaten pack of biscuits. Tibetan scripture books were piled on shelves, clothes in one corner. Chopped onions and a knife sat on a board, children's toys on the floor. The obligatory picture of the four presidents of China and a big poster of Mount Kailash were set on the walls amidst many smaller religious pictures, most with curling corners and torn edges. The cupboards, all painted in bright Tibetan colours with glass doors, were similarly crammed full. At the doorway a young girl's head would occasionally dart from behind the door to take a shy look at us.

Once he'd finally settled, Lama Songu told us his story. His family had always been connected with Rinpoche's family. In previous generations they'd been his family's teachers and patrons. Both Rinpoche's father and grandfather had been Nyingma lamas here, in the area around Mount Kailash. But they had to flee the Chinese, and Chiu Gompa had then been destroyed by the Cultural Revolution. In 1984 Lama Songu decided he had to restore the gompa so he moved into the empty buildings as a janitor. The next year he heard Rinpoche was setting up a monastery in Nepal for training monks so he'd toured the region collecting money. Then he crossed illegally into Nepal and met his Rinpoche for the first time. He'd learned so much! He'd been taken to Bodh Gaya for the Dalai Lama's empowerment the following January. After that he ordained as a monk and then returned here. Slowly the gompa has been restored, others had joined the community and now he was the leader. He was leaving the next day for a regional meeting to represent the gompa.

Ajahn Amaro told him that he, too, was an abbot and had to go to meetings like that, and showed him pictures of Amaravati. Lama Songu nodded and smiled. Yes, there was so much of this to do. So now he lived here. His wife was long dead and he had no children. He had taken in the adopted daughter of his sister and her child.

We left, walking down the hill, each wearing our white silk khata and feeling uplifted by our visit. Dorje was particularly

affected. His usual taciturn and guarded manner had gone and instead he chatted away enthusiastically about the Buddhism of his childhood and things his mother had told him of the teachings. That was the second time I'd seen him like that. The first had been in the mini-bus on his second day with us when he'd realised that these three Westerners really were Buddhist monks. Now I reflected on what his life must be like. Based on what I'd learnt while teaching in Latvia, once part of the Soviet Union, I guessed he had to be an informer to be able to do the job he did. The Communist Party would want him to report to a party official after each of his trips. If he didn't provide information then he would lose his job. That was why he had to be so careful. In Latvia the young people told me how difficult it had been for the likes of Dorje's generation, growing up during the worst of the oppression, and that we should not judge them too harshly. On the drive from Mount Kailash, when he wouldn't let us take a photo of a plastic policeman draped with white khata scarves by Tibetan pilgrims, which would have made such a good image, I was annoyed. Now I felt sympathy.

Over the following days both Dhammarakkho and Appamado took Lama Songu up on his generosity, climbing several times to spend time in the cave or one of the gompa's chapels. The others also went at least once, but for me the short climb was too daunting and I just wandered slowly along the beach.

We met for our meals and for tea in the afternoon. By the second day enough vitality had returned for me to think to ask Chris how the kora had been for him. His eyes lit up as he described how powerful the final climb to the pass had been. Ahead were the three mountain peaks representing the three bodhisattvas of bliss, compassion and emptiness and he had sensed a triangle with compassion, represented by Kailash itself, holding together the others. He'd told us in Kathmandu how he felt a strong need to develop compassion; he'd done a lot of concentration practice and knew bliss and emptiness well. Now on the side of Kailash he understood and was immersed in compassion: the much larger, stronger compassion needed to hold

the other two. He climbed the whole way up to the pass filled with joy, gazing up, over and again, at the three peaks, with Kailash gazing back down at him benevolently, so that he felt carried to the top effortlessly. His time at the top was a celebration of what had just happened. Everything he did, playing with stones, flying prayer flags, was an expression of this powerful insight. By the time he finished telling me, there were tears in his eyes.

Until then, dullness had narrowed my vision to just my own concerns, so Chris' story acted as a revelation. I had companions who had been experiencing wonderful things! Over the subsequent days I took to asking each of the others how their kora had been. Dhammarakkho told me that he'd finally resolved the deep anguish of his daughter's death all those years before and now felt light and free, Rory had felt connected to pure light and energy and had floated down the other side of the pass. Even Appamado, despite a constant migraine, had been deeply moved by the final climb and its effects: particularly the sense of release and joy. Ajahn Amaro's kora had been the same, as he described in Amaravati Monastery's newsletter on his return. He also told me how the steady progression from walking in the Atlas Mountains, then climbing up through Humla and over the Himalayan passes had made it possible to climb the final pass with comparative ease. "My breathing sounded like Darth Vader, but inside I was fine. I was carried up by the shared aspiration of all the Indians and those Tibetans doing full-length prostrations." Now, at Lake Manasarovar, he was enjoying the result of the kora in his meditation.

It helped to hear how much my companions had benefited from a pilgrimage that I'd instigated and organised. But for me the joy I'd had on the morning after we crossed the pass had faded before I got to Darchen, never to return. Instead I felt disconnected, not wanting to be there. But I was reluctant to tell them that – I felt like the killjoy at a party. While they were enjoying themselves so much at Lake Manasarovar, as Ajahn Sucitto had told us we would, I simply yearned to go home.

On our last day I was resting in our bedroom after the meal

when I heard Roger's loud voice coming from the main room. He was interrogating one of the monks about why we hadn't undertaken the kora of Lake Manasarovar. "It is very powerful. You had three days here. Two days is enough to do the important sections." He said something about five coloured sands that had to be collected and other things they had missed. My heart sank; I remembered he'd told us we might meet him at Lake Manasarovar leading another party and I realised that he'd want to interrogate me, too! Then he was speaking German and there were other German voices. Oh no! Not lots of intense Germans as well! I couldn't cope with that! I got up and stole out without meeting anyone, resolving I'd climb to the gompa to make up for my cowardice.

The slow, difficult climb was well worth the effort. As I circled the crag the incredible views were again breath-taking. This time though, I kept climbing, spiralling up to find myself at the top between the two stupas. I sat there with streams of fluttering prayer flags descending all round me, the views between them coming and going. It was an amazing experience, but despite it, I was still aware of the background sense there was to everything: I wanted to go home. Once home, things would be ordinary, assuring, secure. I didn't want any more adventure. I felt I didn't want to see anything, or go anywhere, ever again.

Roger spotted me returning several hours later, and called me in to the main room where he was sitting drinking tea with a bevy of Slovakian (not German) women, all of them younger than him and listening to his every word.

"The monks tell me the kora was difficult for you. Yes?"

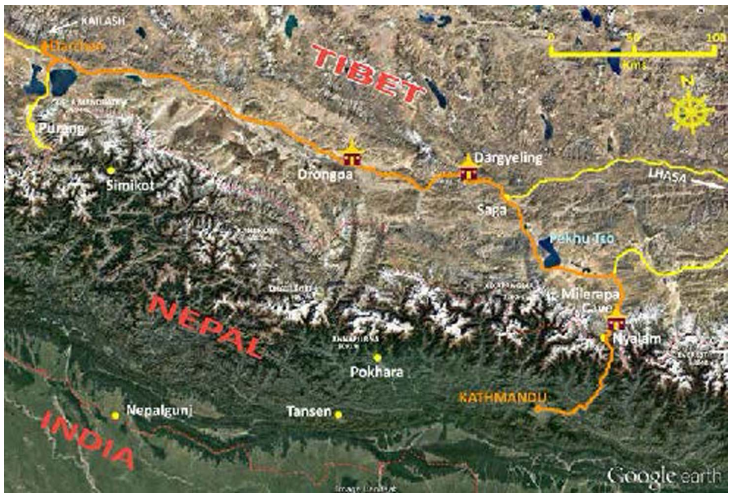
"Yes."

"Why is this?"

I told him the problems that had started at high altitude in Tibet, then about the climb up to the pass. How I felt close to death on the steepest part of the climb, my chest so painful, the few steps I could walk and waiting so long before I could do a few more. The sense that I had to nurse myself up that slope. "I felt so close to death, but maybe I was just imagining it… "

"No. You weren't imagining. You were extremely close. You are a very brave man."

But I didn't feel brave. I just wanted to go home.



10 Inquiring Within

Two buses: one orange, one blue. Tourist buses, with the usual swirls of colourful decoration that adorn all buses in Nepal. Each with a large white banner tied across its front, beneath the window, proclaiming in Nepali where they were going and why. I was standing outside the Viswa Shanti Vihar in Kathmandu and the buses were nearly ready to depart – thirty minutes late. The first was filled with monastics, the second with laypeople, both often three to a seat. The last lay arrivals were still being squeezed aboard the second bus, clambering in, carrying small stools to be placed down the aisles.

I stood with the others who were to be left behind: one younger monk, a nun who hadn't been here last time we stayed, a few excited young novices, and half a dozen laypeople. My three monastic companions were aboard the first bus in the second row of seats, behind two senior Nepali monks on one side and the three young nuns who'd taken care of us, on the driver's side. Chris had left us as soon as we crossed the border so he could at last do something for himself – two days' walking alone in the Nepali mountains – and Rory had opted to stay in the tourist area of Thamel when we got back to Kathmandu, already planning the meal he'd have in a pizza restaurant. So this goodbye was going to be significant. Although the buses would be back from Trisuli the following afternoon, after the celebrations there – the fiftieth anniversary of something educational – by then I would be at the airport for my flight home. I was about to wave goodbye to the last of my companion pilgrims.

We'd arrived in Kathmandu two days before, given a ride from

the border in an old bus waiting there for Roger's group of Slovakian women. The border had been a startling change of cultures. We'd driven down to it in our little mini-bus, descending the steep, narrow valley of the Sun Kosi River from Nyalam on the edge of the Tibetan plateau where we'd stayed the night in a Chinese hotel, with me lying awake again, this time listening to thumping music from the hotel's night club. Tibetan towns might be noisy, but the Chinese ensure they're orderly. The countryside is also regulated: the small villages and fields of young rye which had appeared when we reached the river's upper reaches had stopped at the town. No one was allowed between the town and the border. Instead it was fabulous, pristine, montane forest, dripping with climbers and flowering epiphytic plants. I'd have loved to spend the day walking down that road, not that the Chinese would have let me.

We had said goodbye to Dorje at the Chinese border buildings, after he'd explained what we had to do. There was no need, really, as everything on the Chinese side was so regulated: large notices with pictures indicated each stage. Tibetans and Nepalis and a scattering of Westerners stood patiently in long queues before each. At the Customs desk, a Western couple were being interrogated about a map in their guide book which had 'incorrect' borders for China (you must carry nothing showing either Tibet or Taiwan as a separate country). As we crossed to Nepal the first half of the road bridge was crowded with Nepalis staggering along with vast loads strapped to their head, or coming towards us to collect more: men, women, some with babies, even grandmothers, but they were still being controlled by two Chinese policeman standing in the middle. But beyond them was a large scrum of people, pressing to be allowed to pass, and beyond that, unstructured chaos. On the bridge's far side there was no indication where Immigration was – down the street in a side building Roger had warned us – or Customs, and no one checking we had stopped at either. There were just teeming crowds, noise, shops and a long line of waiting lorries. We were in Nepal.

Roger's bus felt so spacious after our lesser vehicle, the scenery

so different: every slope not too steep was terraced with paddy fields, even the near vertical slopes had no real forest; it was rock, scrub or a few trees hanging from places animals couldn't reach. We wound our way down the valley as it slowly broadened out, allowing paddy fields by the river, gazing out at Nepal. Then the bus climbed up and out of the river valley, passing more sophisticated buildings, into the wide, rolling Kathmandu valley. In the city, Roger wanted to drop us a mile from the vihara. Would we mind? Although it was raining, no one had a problem, my companions were happy to walk. And they did enjoy it, positively delighting at walking at a much lower altitude, bowling along in a line ahead of me on the road side, full packs on their backs and chatting happily, exclaiming at how easy it felt. All except me: I felt like the wet blanket at a party again. I was tired, fed up, and I still just wanted to go home.

Two days' rest at the vihara – actually sleeping all night long! – improved my humour enough to manage polite society. But after waving goodbye to the two buses and my companions, when they finally left nearly an hour late, I was still pleased I hadn't been able to join them and could instead return to my room. A room I had to myself, at last.

Later, I went out to the local shopping district looking to treat myself. I found a bakery with a café I'd not noticed before. A garden with tables at the back, away from the roar and hooting of the traffic. There I had a coffee, a slice of cake. Sitting somewhere pleasant, it felt so therapeutic. I sat there for two hours just enjoying it, during which I asked myself, several times, 'What's this all been about?' Nothing came. Instead, there was just the quiet enjoyment of each moment.

On the journey back from Kailash I'd been asking myself that same question. It was my turn to sit in the front seat of the mini-bus. In the dull state I'd been in, I'd let everyone else have their turn first. Now, sitting there, watching the wide scenery pass by, driving east over a vast, dry, stony, outwash plain that ran up to the

Himalayas, I finally had enough vitality to appreciate it. And I kept asking myself, "Why?" But there'd been no reply then either. There was simply the line of white peaks, crystal clear, set in a white blue sky. We drove beside them for much of two days, Rory naming Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, which were slightly higher than the rest. Roger later told us that it was the clearest view he'd ever had.

At one point we dropped into the valley of the River Tsangpo, which eventually becomes the mighty Brahmaputra in India. Here it was just a small river with a Tibetan village, rye fields and dry, stony valley sides, on one slope the ruined remains of a large Buddhist monastery, with a few restored buildings. We'd been asked to stop there by a Tibetan monk who Ajahn Amaro had met at a European conference. The monk, now the teacher at a Tibetan centre in Italy, had asked if we might deliver money to his uncle at this monastery. He'd sent me two hundred American dollars which I'd been carrying for the whole pilgrimage.

Even at the time of the Cultural Revolution, eighty-six monks had still lived in the accommodation blocks which were now just piles of rubble. Now there were just five, all in their twenties except for their teacher, the uncle, and a Tibetan plain-clothed policeman that Dorje quietly warned us about. The young monks took us to see their teacher, who must have been in his eighties: they had to help him into the room and relay Dorje's questions in a loud voice. They also helped him receive the khata Ajahn Amaro offered. But the old monk was still a blessing to the valley, a peaceful presence. Haltingly, he told Dorje that he'd returned from Nepal in the 1980s for a visit to the ruined monastery he'd fled during the Cultural Revolution. He'd only come back to see his mother before she died, but the villagers had begged him to stay and so he couldn't leave. His nephew, who'd recently become a monk in Nepal, sent Buddhist images and money to help rebuild the temple and a few other buildings. The same nephew, now based in Italy, had sent the two hundred dollars.

I presented the money formally. I wanted to honour that story. On my knees I bowed three times and still on my knees I handed

the envelope to the old monk, Rory taking a photo to send to Italy. Afterwards, outside, Rory also took a group photo of our monks with the young Tibetan ones. They had exclaimed with delight at the first meeting, Dorje told us, saying that our monks were 'like Shakyamuni Buddha'. They were so kind around their teacher, but as I stood there I couldn't help but reflect that he wasn't much longer for this world and then what? I was overcome with sadness about what had been done to the Tibetans. I remembered Stephen telling us of his visit to the great Sera Monastery outside of Lhasa where his teacher had come from. How he'd found lots of boys and a handful of old monks, and them asking him to teach them, which he'd found heartrending. And I was asking that question again. "Why? What was all this about?"

That day, crossing a pass, we came upon undulating dunes of fine sand. Everyone wanted to stop at this mini Sahara. Dorje and the driver climbed the highest dune, looking like two desert explorers, to take pictures of each other on top. The others wandered about in the same playful state, but I could only think that the dunes weren't natural; they'd been caused by overgrazing, that was something semi-desert like western Tibet was particularly susceptible to. Those dunes also made me reflect on how most of the habitat we'd been amidst was equally degraded, just stony wasteland.

Another story Stephen told us came to me, of looking for a monastery on their journey back to Kathmandu when he visited Tibet for a second time in 1997. "I was trying to find the main monastery of the Jonang-pa. They used to be a big noise in central Tibet and were condemned by Tsongkhapa as heretics. They had some of the greatest scholars until the Gelug-pa came along and wiped them out. Their main monastery apparently still existed so I figured where it was on the map and we left the main road. When we couldn't find it we camped and had lunch out on this huge, vast, empty plain – except for this little black dot which we just watched as we ate. It came slowly towards us until we realised it was a shepherd now surrounded by lots of other smaller dots and eventually, as we finished, he arrived and being Western Buddhists

we gave him a picture of the Dalai Lama and he says, 'Who's he?' so the driver replies, I still remember the phrase – it translates 'If you really want a lama this is your man'. So then we asked him about his life and found that he and his family had been doing the same thing for centuries. Basically: get up in the morning, take your flock and set off round the mountain. The Chinese invasion, everything, hadn't affected him at all. Hardly knew about it. Most of Tibet must be still like that today." It was such grazing for centuries which had created the habitat of stony bare ground with a few low thorny shrubs.

Stephen also told me about the forests that had once lined the valleys in Tibet. "The fourteenth-century records of some of the great monasteries describe disputes with other monasteries over their ownership. That was their fuel and building timber. Eventually they must have cut them all down." The trees would have lined the sides of valleys like the bare one we'd just stopped in.

The next day we stopped for our lunch by a lake. By then we were driving over the dry outwash plain again, on a wide dirt track that cut across to the road from Lhasa to Kathmandu. At the lake we followed the shore until we came to a small stream flowing between banks of short grass. I could see why Roger had recommended stopping here: it was the only pleasant place we'd passed on the entire journey. The rest of the journey was through scenery spectacular to look at, but desolate to stop amidst. Roger arrived soon after we'd unpacked, with his party of Slovakian women in another mini-bus. We had our picnics together with the monks chanting a blessing, the distant white Himalayas in the background. It made a lovely scene, one that was completely ruined ten minutes later when four coaches of Indian pilgrims stopped for their lunch. They were on their way to Kailash, they told us excitedly, as they swarmed over the grass, taking pictures of the mountains, the lake and us.

That evening when we arrived at Nyalam and another modern concrete Chinese hotel, I ignored both Dorje's warnings about what we could do there, and the rest of the party's reluctance to

join me: I climbed slowly out of the town up to the alpine grasslands I'd spotted just above the road on the way in. My questioning had turned into a determination to do something for myself. The hillsides were awash with flowers: delicate, hanging fritillaries, dark-blue gentians, tufts of edelweiss and both yellow and pink primroses. That same sense of rebellion was also why I was so intolerant of a comment Chris made next morning when travelling down the valley through that pristine forest. Until then I'd managed to remain polite with my companions despite what I'd been going through. But when Chris said something romantic and uplifting about the wildlife and the local people, I had to put him right. 'That's complete rubbish, Chris. We're looking at some of the very last untouched forest in all the Himalayas, only left here because the Chinese are so paranoid about the border that they have banned people from entering it!" Of course, I then regretted it.

But in Kathmandu, the rebellion had passed, leaving again just the question of 'why?' When I returned from the café, I got talking to a monk I'd not seen before. He was middle-aged and quite senior. He told me that he lived in a kuti, a one-room building for monks, around the back of the vihara and that his name was "Upananda with one p." He was a Brahmin by birth, not a Newari Buddhist, and had become a monk to practise meditation, which he'd done in various monasteries around Burma. In his gentle voice he explained how he now stayed here, continuing to practise and helping out in the vihara when needed, like now with the other monks off on the coach trip, "but not all the time. There's too much activity here."

He was not interested in all the study they did, he told me. "When you understand, you don't need teacher, just need to do."

"Yes."

"You don't need technique, just need to sit."

"Yes."

"Then this life, all this life is for learning."

"Yes, Bhante. And it takes courage." And he gave me a little nod.

I spent the remainder of the day up on the flat roof with a tray of tea brought to me by the lone nun. The sun had just set, evening was gathering and, here and there, house lights were coming on. There I became enfolded in a great sense of peace. The pilgrimage was over, my companions gone. I was going home the next day. It was done.

From this peaceful perspective it didn't matter what it had all been about. It was just this: the traffic passing on the main road nearby, the city in the half light, the dark outline of the trees by the river, the cool air after a hot day. There is just 'this', and this is all there ever is. Looking back I could see that I'd never looked forward to the pilgrimage. I'd always known it was going to be really, really hard. And it was. But it was simply something that had to be done. It arises, one bows to it, one accepts it, one simply does it.

Beyond the suburb of houses opposite, planes were taking off into the night, their lights tracking up and away.

This vihara had once been a small house, with a monk and a few novices living by the river out of town, on the quiet road to the airport. Now it was an institution in the midst of a noisy, polluted metropolis. Tibetan Buddhism was once just a few hermits living in caves. It grew into vast institutions which honoured them as saints. Then it was devastated by the Chinese. The planet's nature, the incredibly rich, green mantle we humans grew up in, is steadily being degraded. Each subsequent generation now has to mourn as more of it steadily goes during their lifetime. Everything that arises passes away. If we can accept this is how it is, then there is one thing that doesn't change, and that's the perspective I felt enveloped in that night. The 'this is how it is' ness.

The planes taking off were flying west under a new moon.

Ajahn Sumedho would constantly say about monasteries and the monastic order that "these are merely conventions." As well as providing a lifestyle for the practice of the Buddhist teachings they became an institution, like the Catholic Church, that carries and protects the teachings through time. The Tibetan system of

reincarnated tulkus, or rinpoches, did that well, but as Stephen pointed out, it was usually only the two tulkus in a monastery who got the opportunity to practice those teachings. By the time the Chinese destroyed the monasteries in Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism seemed to have become a cultural set of beliefs, a wonderful one that supported what now, looking back, seems an amazing society, but in that society the heart of the practice had mostly been pressed out of it by the weight of all that elaborate ritual and concern with power. Everything that arises passes away. That even goes for the Buddhist teachings themselves; they, too, are just conventions. They are not themselves the end of suffering.

Pema Riksal Rinpoche told us, "sunyata is powerful, it leads to many miracles." Call the miracles grace if you want. So much is made of these in Tibetan Buddhism, and in most religions. But such powerful things are simply effects and if you make too much of them, as the Buddha never did, you end up worshipping the memory of an effect, rather than focusing on what caused it.

Planes taking off, flying west under a new moon. As I would be, the following evening.

By the time I got home, battered by a long-haul flight to London crammed into an economy seat, then travelling from there to the West of Ireland, the resolution and the resulting perspective I had on the vihara's roof had completely gone. Instead there was just the trauma of what I'd been through.

Mich was relieved to have me back, whatever I was like. She'd become convinced I was going to die in Tibet. And it wasn't just her: a friend who'd asked me to lay an offering scarf on Dolma-La had woken one night knowing I'd died on the pass.

Mich said my eyes were dead for the first two months. For me, the trauma manifested as the wish not to engage or to meet people. I spent much of that time rebuilding old stone walls in the fields. If anyone came to visit I'd slip off and Mich would have to apologise and explain. As a result I pulled my back, but at least the trauma slowly ebbed. Eventually I felt normal again. But I still

couldn't begin writing this account of the pilgrimage, as I'd intended. I didn't want to even think about it!

Eight months after my return I did my annual one-month retreat in Connemara. At the same cottage, at the base of the same mountain, where I'd originally conceived the notion of a pilgrimage to Holy Kailash, following in Ajahn Sumedho's footsteps. For all of that month I was re-engulfed in the traumatic state I'd brought home with me, enduring a mind that didn't want to engage, struggling constantly against lethargy and dullness. On the first day walking by the sea, I slipped on the rocks, cut my head and sprained my ankle badly, so I also spent most of the month limping and with my head bandaged.

A few days before the month's end the trauma finally lifted, the bandage and limp had gone, and I could walk down the beach feeling free, exulting in the wind and waves. I had re-found the relief I'd had in the Kathmandu café, and I realised that I could now write this account of the pilgrimage. But I also came back to that question: "Why? What was it all about?" I had trusted the notion I should go to Kailash because the idea had arisen in such a powerful way on the mountain during the previous retreat, and seemingly despite my own wishes. I'd bowed to it, accepted it. But all it had resulted in was a hell of a lot of pain, and just one evening of relief and perspective on the vihara roof. Was that all? Surely it had to be about more than that. So I resolved that once I'd written the first draft I'd go out to Thailand to see Ajahn Sumedho, my teacher, and ask him why.

A year and a half later I went to Wat Pa Ratanawan where Ajahn Sumedho now lived. It is a monastery I already knew well – because of the abbot, Ajahn Nyanadhammo. The first time I'd seen it, it was just a small patch of forest on a corner of Kow Yai National Park. That was in 2007, on a trip I made to visit the Western Ajahn Chah monasteries in Thailand. Ratanawan had been suggested to me as an afterthought. "Ajahn Nyana's got some land at the back of the park. I think he's making a monastery. But

it's only him and a couple of Thai monks…" But it still counted as something Western in the Ajahn Chah tradition. So I stopped by at the end of my tour.

I found'Ajahn Nyana' was a large bluff Australian, very practical, and immersed in a project to re-landscape the land and construct a monastery. As that's what I'd been doing for the past ten years, we got on well. He told me how happy he was to be responsible for an excavator rather than training thirty Western monks. He'd just stepped down as the abbot of the main Western monastery, Wat Pa Nanachat, and still seemed bruised by the experience.

We stood together in a swamp talking over his plans to convert the swamp to lakes surrounded by forest to be planted on the farmland beyond the swamp. The lakes would keep the forest cool and stop the mosquitoes, which can't breed in permanent water because of the fish. "And up there will be the sala," the meditation hall. He pointed at the top of a slight rise, "where the air can blow through it." It was all so sensible. Planting a new forest adjacent to the national park would mean the plants and animals from there would easily colonise. Using this land as a forest monastery would stop much of the incursions from the park by large wild animals that the villagers were suffering. And his influence could stop the villagers poaching. I was deeply impressed.

Ajahn Nyana' also told me why he could only start the work then. "We bought this swamp a year back, but I needed the piece between it and what we had. When I asked the fellow, he wanted, like, thirty times the going price. Which was outrageous. And he also insisted we buy all his land, including some across the road," he pointed up to the entrance I'd arrived through, "and I was totally uninterested in going across the road – I could see no use for it. So end of story. Then one of the Thai monks here, Tan Moshe, went with another monk to see Luang Por Plien in Cheng Mai. He's 97 and is supposed to have contact with the devatas." They're the Buddhist angels which Thais are so keen on. "As soon as Tan Moshe told him where they were from, Luang Por put the flat of his hand down like this and put his other hand flat down like

this and said, 'this is the land you have and there's a piece of land in the middle you don't have and it goes across the road. On the piece across the road there are two trees, one a really big, straight tree and with a bent tree under it. In that tree there's a resident deity and the abbot hasn't been to get his approval. If he goes to the deity, he doesn't need candles, incense and flowers, he just needs to go there, put his hands in anjali and say if the resident deity would help to make this land a monastery he will share the merit with the deity and it will be of long-lasting benefit. Well, all I could say was, 'OK, let's go take a look'. We'd never been over there, had no idea what was there, but we wandered over and there were two trees, like he said, one big and straight, the other bent. So then I had to go along with it, put aside my scepticism and ask for approval, like he said. Within a week the fellow comes back! I hadn't seen him since the first time, a year ago, and he says he wants to sell the land at the going price. He told me his eighty-seven–year-old mother had said the Western monk had lots of money and he had to ask that price. But since then she'd died and he'd been feeling sad about her actions so he also wanted to donate the land over the road for the benefit of his mother. Now I've decided to build a women's section there."

I came back to Wat Pah Ratanawan a year later, on a trip showing Mich the monasteries I'd stayed in. We found Ajahn Nyana' supervising a large bulldozer using a theodolite to level the new land. Mich still refers to him today as earth-moving monk. Then, several years later when it was announced that Ajahn Sumedho was to retire to Thailand, put down his various burdens, and stay in a kuti built for him – location not to be disclosed, I knew where it must be. Where better than overlooking one of those lakes with the forest of Kow Yai National Park rising behind it, and who better to build it for him. Then the year before I went to Kailash, Mich and I stopped off to see Ajahn Sumedho there.

Ajahn Nyana' told me then that Ajahn Sumedho had been for a visit two years before. "He was absolutely battered with all the troubles happening then. And I thought I'd been in a bad state! I really felt how tired he was, and then he says, 'You know, I'd like to

come back to Thailand one day.' I think it was wandering in the forest, just the two of us, which got him to say it. He told me that he'd never envisaged going back to the West, that Ajahn Chah wanted him to go. Deep down he'd like to come back, before he died. It was very moving. I thought, 'What would Ajahn Chah want me to do?' So I said I'd build him a kuti with no expectation he had to use it. He just said thanks then, but the next day he said he'd seriously consider it and, literally, the last nail was banged in ten minutes before his car pulled up a year later."

A kuti is the name for the little wooden huts in the forest in which Buddhist monks can reside. But of course, this was much more substantial than those. It does have wooden tiles to the roof, and a long, roofed, wooden walkway leading from the road to the front door. But actually it's a little two-story house, on a slope, so that from the track you enter the upper floor where Ajahn Sumedho lives. The lower floor is laid out so that one day an attendant can live there, should Ajahn Sumedho need caring for. Ajahn Nyana' has thought of everything. On that visit with Mich, a year after he'd moved in, I felt such joy for Ajahn Sumedho. He told us how he just pottered about, occasionally went on alms round with the monks but had no responsibilities, no teaching. He said there was no sense of time, at all.

There is also a magnificent sala at Ratanawan now, built on the rise Ajahn Nyana' pointed out, in the traditional style that dates from before Thai temples turned bright red and gold. It's made mostly of reddish brown teak, giant posts each made from a whole tree, rising to a wooden ceiling, with wooden tiles covering stepped, layered roofs that curve down and out in that distinctive Thai way, each faced with a carved, wooden barge board. It's breathtakingly beautiful. The floor is marble, but the temple is surrounded by teak decking to create a platform which looks out over the largest of the lakes to the mature trees in the national park beyond. And all those planted trees Ajahn Nyana' planned are now semi-mature and producing fruit, so that hornbills have moved into the monastery to nest. He's introducing wild orchids and tree ferns to the forest now, planting rattans and other tropical

climbers.

The monastery is growing, too. There are fourteen monks, mostly young, educated Thais from Bangkok, several with doctorates. They appreciate Ajahn Nyana's Western understanding of their traditional teachings, but they must be much easier to train than Westerners. Ajahn Nyana' does the Thai ajahn well, walking slowly round the monastery, a young monk or two, or one of the lay workers, in attendance, sorting problems, or sitting in the sala, leaning back on a cushion, receiving visitors, making the locals laugh with some comment, or explaining the teachings to new people from afar. And Ajahn Sumedho is left undisturbed, tucked away in a private part of the new woodland.

I arrived during the last week of the rainy season. Every few days, dark, rumbling clouds would build over the Kow Yai hills in the afternoon. I'd hear the rain coming as a roar in the trees, before it poured down for several hours. Over four of those afternoons I met Ajahn Sumedho in his kuti.

The main room looks out onto its own lake, built where the swamp once was. One side wall had become a large shrine since my last visit, with six reclining Buddha images. Ajahn Sumedho sat on a wide seat facing it. After I'd bowed to the shrine he explained the reclining images.

"It shows my age. I spent a week at Kushinara last year, where the Buddha passed away. I found the reclining Buddha there so peaceful, so they made me one out of marble." Presumably the five others were given when supporters found out what he liked. "They really know how to look after old monks in Thailand. Ajahn Nyanadhammo has been very good to me here. I've always wanted to live like this."

During those four afternoons we talked of all manner of things, recalling those walks we did together, characters we both knew, difficult times we'd shared, his new plans – he'd recently decided to teach again, and had agreed to lead a ten-day retreat in Brazil. And I gave him a slideshow on Mich's small laptop I'd brought with me. We looked at the photos from his two pilgrimages to Kailash, and those taken by Ajahn Amaro and Rory of ours. There

was enough time to ask all my questions. I recorded everything and then diligently transcribed it while staying at the monastery, sitting outside the small room they'd given me in the forest.

Ajahn Sumedho is referred to now as Luang Por, Venerable Father, the name Thais have for very senior monks. I started by asking him how his first Mount Kailash pilgrimage came to happen.

"Well, it arose with Sugato, the idea of a trip. And he knew Andrew Yeats…"

"Yes, Luang Por, but how did you come to want to go?

"I'd always known about the holy mountain, that pilgrimage was a dream I had, but I never thought I'd get to go."

"So when did that dream date from?"

"Well, I did a Master's in Indian Cultural Studies at Berkeley. I was particularly interested in the religious side, so I'd studied Tibetan Buddhism, Shiva worship, Aurobindo Goshe, Theosophical Society, all that stuff. And I loved Lama Govinda's book, 'Way of the White Clouds'."

"Studying Eastern religion in the 1950s must have been pretty unusual?"

"I'd had this fascination with Asia ever since I was a little child, for some unaccountable reason. We didn't grow up with Asian people. In the part of Seattle I lived in it was all middle-class white people. But somehow I always had this attraction… My first memory is of the old lady who used to take care of my sister and I, when my mother was away. She had a calendar. I was very young then: three, four, and she had this beautiful calendar with Mount Fujiyama. She was American, but she collected curiosities. Later, if I went through China Town, or if I saw anything Chinese or Japanese…

"So then I did a degree in Chinese History, at University of Washington in Seattle in '51. We had Chinese professors who'd just escaped Communism in China in '49. So we had the best. There were very few places you could study that, so I was lucky to be born in Seattle. That's when I got to understand Buddhism. Then I knew, that was what I was looking for. Before that, it was

general, anything China, the word China was the stimulating word but then, when I discovered Buddhism, I was not interested in Chinese history and all the other stuff. Then I met Zen Buddhism in Japan, when I was in the Navy. That was a year later."

"Wow, so long before you became a monk you knew Kailash as the holy mountain for Hindus and Buddhists…"

"Yes, Lord Shiva's up there." And he gave me one of his knowing smiles.

I then told Ajahn Sumedho that Andrew Yeats had, in fact, already met him. How after Andrew's first trip to Mount Kailash, in the 1980s, he'd been so inspired he'd become a novice monk at Wat Pah Nanachat, the monastery for Westerners founded by Ajahn Sumedho.

"He didn't tell me that!"

"He said he only met you the once when you were visiting from England, so you wouldn't recall him, but I suspect it's also because he was embarrassed he'd left. He said he couldn't cope with the heat."

"Andrew's a devata, he likes heavenly realms," he said with a laugh, "so he wouldn't be good at putting up with unpleasant mind states." But as we looked through the slides taken of their pilgrimage trip, showing the group walking up through Humla, Ajahn Sumedho really praised Andrew, saying what a good walk leader he'd been, always there to keep an eye on him, and on Anne, who was struggling. "Not off at the front like Sugato, who just wanted to bliss out on the place."

The other two themes of his comments as we looked at those slides were how pleasant and harmonious a group they all were, and how wonderful the trek had been. I was surprised just how much he enjoyed looking at them and the memories they brought back for him. That hadn't occurred to me; I'd thought of my visit as an imposition. It can be like that when you're around your teacher: you can forget they're just the same as everyone else. "It's really beautiful, look at that! It was like going back centuries, Nick. I've no regrets, you know, it was worth going just for that trek though Humla. I really enjoyed it…"

When we got to the final part, inside Tibet, I asked him to describe what he remembered had happened. "Well, there were no guards on the border. So we thought that was a good sign. Then at the immigration office in the town it seemed like we'd got through, but then they changed their mind…."

"And how did that feel?"

"I felt disappointed. We'd formed such a nice group. It felt like being taken away from family. Everyone was crying, I think even some of the Chinese guards were crying! So all those emotions I felt, but what could you do? You don't argue with men with guns.

"Sugato and I were escorted back by guards with rifles, on an army vehicle. They took us to the Nepal border and dumped us there. We had to walk across the bridge with our gear and camp on the other side of the river." There were no houses there then, no tea shops as on our trip. "The next morning all the Sherpas had was this packet of cornflakes for the four of us."

"So how much cornflakes did you get?"

"A bowl. It was like the old Weetabix commercials: Ajahn Sumedho, weak and exhausted, is given a bowl of cornflakes and climbs the mountain!" And he roared with laughter. Then he told me, as Anne already had, that he'd taken a personal vow to ask for nothing on the pilgrimage but had then told Andrew that he'd prefer not to have cornflakes and hot milk for breakfast, and how he felt this final difficulty was a karmic result of breaking his vow.

"It was a very hard climb." That's the climb back the others did in the snow. It is far longer and steeper than any single climb coming the other way. "Getting near the top I was exhausted, nothing left, and there was a Tibetan woman and her son, refugees. She was making Tibetan tea with yak's butter and salt, and she wanted to give me some. That's what got me to the top!" They camped on the far side of the pass and the Sherpas found food from a village for their next day. From there they walked down the valley to Yalbang Monastery. "The head lama had invited us to stay. But then, as we approached, there was this doughnut-shaped cloud, huge, that seemed really ominous to both Sugato and I: we had this dark gloomy feeling. Then it started to

rain. It seemed as if it was waiting for us to get to the monastery. Once we were there it really poured. It's not supposed to rain at that time of year and it must never rain like that because after a few days the roofs started to cave in. But the head lama gave us a room above the new temple, which had a tin roof. The old buildings there have flat mud roofs. He also invited us to eat with him in his house, which was very nice, but after the first day even his roof started to leak and cave in. So the rest of the monastery was a disaster: the new toilets, the other accommodation, all the roofs collapsing, except the new temple. Sugato and I were in our room meditating and looking out on the rain. You couldn't be more thankful for tin roofs in your life!

"The head lama was the one who asked me about Monica Lewinsky!" he laughed. "That was a real shock. I thought they were completely cut off from the world. But he was incredibly good to us, really looked out for us. He was an important figure there. No one wants to live in Humla. A Nepalese doctor told me, 'Humla, that's the posting we all didn't want!' The head lama could have been down in Kathmandu with Westerners making a fuss of him." By the time our party got there not only had Pema Riksal Rinpoche put tin roofs on all the other buildings, but he'd built a large school and clinic, too.

"The day Andrew came back, we guessed they were coming because the sun came out. We thought they'd had a wonderful time, while we'd been stuck there in the rain, but then they told us the mule had died and the cook nearly died and Andrew said, 'I'm so pleased you weren't with us Ajahn, because you could have died!' So now I thank the Communist Chinese for looking after me." And he chuckled at that.

"And the rest of the walk back?"

"It felt good to be with them all again. We'd really bonded." I showed him the slides of them walking down the Humla Valley together under blue skies. "Oh yes, I remember that, very pleasant. But then the final climb up to Simikot, I kept on thinking this is the top, but it never was. Then when we got to the top there was a tea shop. Oh, I still remember that cup of tea…."

"Luang Por, what about these strange coincidences that happen: like you and the cornflakes, or Ajahn Amaro and his connection with the Nyingma? When the Buddha said there is much I know and do not teach, is this the kind of thing he was referring to?"

"Yes. The rational mind is very limited, you know, when you try to think with logic and reason. That's where faith takes over. Then you can open up to the unknown. A lot of life is not rational or reasonable, but it is 'the way it is'".

"That's what I've had to deal with as a scientist," I told him, "opening up to the fact I can't understand everything. It's actually really helped me, because if I can't explain these odd coincidences, well, really I can't explain any of it, and I have to give up. Like the balloon ride for your sixtieth birthday. Do you recall that?"

"Do I ever!"

"I had the idea you'd like a balloon ride and suggested it to the Harnham Monastery Trust, but I was asked how did I know you'd like it? So the Trust got you a garden bench. Sam Ford then said he'd share the cost with me, but when we checked it out it was way too expensive for the two of us. That's because the flight had to start at Chithurst when you came down for a meeting as it was all so busy then, so we'd have to hire a whole balloon, not just one place in a regular trip. So we gave up.

"Then a week later, I was sitting in the Chithurst shrine room, the old one, gazing up at the golden Buddha in the evening meditation, something I used to do then. And there was this noise, 'pshhh…. pshhh….' I knew it was a hot-air balloon coming over the house! Then it filled the bay window behind the Buddha until it was just the golden Buddha and this colourful balloon behind him. I realised it must be landing in the monastery's field and all the hairs on the back of my neck went up! I got up in the middle of the evening sitting – I felt like some kind of zombie, I was in such shock. I went out there and helped them pack it up. Then I said to this little chap, still feeling weirdly disconnected. 'It's our teacher's sixtieth birthday and I want to get him a balloon ride, could you do it?' and he said he'd love to, so I asked how much. 'Oh, it would

be free. I landed here last year and the monks showed me round'!"

"That's a good one!" he laughed, "And there was Ajahn Anek and Ajahn Passano…."

"Yes, all those visiting senior monks, and abbots, who were there for the big meeting. That was why I wasn't going to go myself: senior monks had been coming up all week and asking me 'Arhm, Nick, how many can the balloon take?' So I knew they all wanted to go, but then I was reprimanded by another monk for being irresponsible. If the balloon crashed they'd all be killed and he'd be left in charge! So I thought if that happened I better die with you all!"

Ajahn Sumedho laughed a lot at this, then he recalled, "It was a wonderful ride, we flew over Petersfield, all those people looking up and waving…"

"And high enough to see the sea," I added, "then low and skimming just above the woodland. I saw a sparrow-hawk hunting through the trees…"

"….and we landed in a little tree."

"Then on the way back, in the balloon man's van, Ajahn Pasanno said to you, 'That was a nice birthday present, Luang Por, and you replied, 'Yes, I've always wanted to ride in a hot-air balloon.'"

"I had! You'd see them flying in England: magical, I was like a child seeing the film, 'Wizard of Oz'…"

"But no one told me that; I just knew. And it's experiences like that which have helped me to trust and let go. But it also seems to me the Buddha was avoiding something by not mentioning this kind of thing in his teachings?"

"Yes. Like if I said it was a devata in the balloon!" and Ajahn laughed, "or who arranged the cornflakes! That's what they say in Thailand. But then coming from a Western culture, we tend to go to the other extreme and dismiss all that completely. 'I don't believe in all that rubbish!' But now I don't deny anything because I don't know. If you try to explain it, higher energies, devatas, or what the Tibetan Buddhists say, you make too much of it. Instead, just trust in awareness, and 'this is how it is'. Then you can deal

with the unknown without either trying to rationalise it or dismiss it.

"We want to define things. Then we think they are real because we have definitions. It is like with awareness itself, you can think 'how is it?' and you want to define it. But how can you define this moment? You can't fit it into a definition, you just have to trust in the moment and that all conditions arise and cease. That's all you can know for sure.

"With Tibetan Buddhism, you are up against belief all the time," Ajahn explained. "There is so much structure there and tradition. Theravada has kept it pretty simple. They have their own politics, but you don't have any of the complicated relations like tulkus, reincarnated lamas, and such like. Some people do talk about previous lives and such, but it's not part of the Theravada teaching. Then the Thai forest tradition is very basic, cut back to the four noble truths, suffering and the end of suffering. That's what made it so attractive for me. I didn't need to become more complicated – I was already a neurotic and complicated personality! I wanted to know how to get out of this sticky web of my own thoughts and fears. I didn't want more sticky filaments to attach to…"

The next afternoon I returned to the same room. On one wall is a painting by George Sharp, who, as the chairman of the English Sangha Trust, had originally invited Ajahn Sumedho to England in 1976. It's a perfect copy of one of Roerich's best known paintings, a view of Mount Kailash, with one difference: George has added the small figure of Ajahn Sumedho with pack and staff, walking the kora. He painted it in the years between Ajahn Sumedho's two pilgrimages and it used to hang in Ajahn's old kuti at Amaravati. It was lovely to have it there on the day I showed Ajahn Sumedho the slides of his second pilgrimage, with Hal Nathan and the American party. The pilgrimage that happened after George painted it.

Again Ajahn Sumedho was delighted by the pictures and the

memories they brought up, but this time the comments were very different. "For the first trip, I was running up and down hills in Ashridge Forest to get fit, climbed those mountains in Ireland, through peat bogs, with you, and the way Andrew took us, walking up through Humla…. That way I was used to the altitude." There was no preparation for the second pilgrimage and the party drove from Kathmandu straight up to Nyalam, only just inside Tibet but still at 4,000 metres, where they stayed two nights and did a short hike.

"You look really pooped in that photo after the hike, Luang Por."

"I was."

"And on the kora, were you at the back?"

"Yes."

As we went on through the slides he gradually admitted more about how difficult it was. "It was embarrassing." Then "Pannasaro was unfit, but he was younger, and Beverly, she was my kind of age, but she was fit. She had all the hiking clothes." And "I was always at the back. Just so many steps and then have to stop and all these Tibetans zooming past me, these little old ladies and what not," and he laughed at the humiliation of it all.

"And the food was dreadful, it was inedible. It wasn't even Tibetan food. It was just tasteless, and you lose your appetite when you're up high. Stale bread and a cold boiled potato: I couldn't really eat it and Pannasaro…."

"Yes, when Ajahn Pannasaro mentioned the pink plastic sandwich bags to me, the look of horror on his face…"

"He had a worse time than me. He's Thai; he's never done anything like that in his life. He told me he used to ask himself why I'd asked him to do it! For me, this was the dream I'd had, but for Pannasaro, he just went because I'd asked him!"

But along with their difficulty the other recurring theme was the effect of all the Tibetan devotion. "It was the year of the Water Horse, so there were thousands of Tibetans from all over Tibet and China. With that many devotional Tibetans you can't help but be inspired. That's what gave me the energy, such a high feeling.

We were carried on it. The ones doing the full bows, they looked blissful, happier than the rest of us. They had these leather aprons on. Wooden gloves. It was very impressive."

When I showed him the slide of him climbing the Dolma-La pass, ashen-faced, his response was, "Oh dear." In the next slide he was being helped. "Oh, I was so grateful. These two young Tibetan men came and took my pack. They had shaved heads but lay clothes. They couldn't speak English so they indicated they were monks, like me, but in disguise. They offered to carry my pack. Then they helped me all the way to the top." The slides of him climbing amidst hundreds of Tibetans affected Ajahn Sumedho the most of any we looked at. "It was so uplifting, all that devotion…."

"So when you were going down the other side with Hal, you weren't likely to die as he feared, you were just utterly exhausted?"

"Yes, really exhausted. But each time I stopped, the mind became bright. I could enjoy the mountain. Next day, though, I was too tired. I could do no more. So I took the bus." That would be one of the Chinese blue buses I saw the Indians boarding. "The rest of them walked all the way to Darchen."

"And Pannasaro…?"

"He joined me. He was really glad it was over!"

"But I think, Luang Por, he's proud of it now. When we spoke, he produced that photo of him standing alone with the Tibetan plain beyond him, and waited for the effect on me."

"Yes, now he looks back. It was a powerful experience for him. And for a Thai, that's a very impressive photograph!" "And are you pleased you did it?"

"Yes, very pleased. I fulfilled a dream and so there are no regrets. I don't mind hardship, I can deal with that. I was not expecting it to be easy. It was a challenge. So I am very grateful both to Andrew and Hal. They made it possible. But I've never wanted to do it again!"

I then told Ajahn Sumedho about my own crossing of the Dolma-La pass: the resulting trauma from nearly dying, how I'd had no great release like the others at Lake Manasarovar but

simply yearned to go home, and once home, how I'd needed to hide from people for two months. How the retreat I did next winter was just about processing that trauma. Then I told him about the surprise of the following retreat, a year later, before this trip to Thailand. I was still digesting the result. I'd spent much of that retreat sitting in the same seat, by a window overlooking the small back garden. It was somewhere on previous retreats I might spend just an hour, sitting after the meal. My mind was completely spacious and empty most of the time. With a sense, sometimes, that I should be getting down to practice, which I would resist engaging with, and at other times, that this should be boring. Mostly nothing happened in the small garden, an oblong of lawn surrounded with local shrubs and trees, winter bare. Small birds might occasionally flit about and there was a wild hare, the Irish sub-species with a touch of white to its rear. Some days it would hop into the garden from the rough mountain vegetation beyond, to graze on the short grass. It could be there for hours, gently grazing, hopping forward to fresh grass to graze again, while I quietly watched it. Nothing seemed exceptional at the time, but afterwards I kept reflecting on this profound change to the way I did meditation.

I asked Ajahn Sumedho if this was the result of the pilgrimage – perhaps some of my drive had been worn away by the experience. One sunny day on the retreat I'd climbed up the small mountain behind the cottage, and went the whole way to the top with no sense I had to get there, simply enjoying where I was. Then I noted there was no whoosh of enjoyment when I did get to the top either. Was that the drive being worn away? I asked. I was surprised by his reply. He said it was my bearing of difficult states of mind – that was the reason – staying with the difficulty as I climbed Dolma-La, staying with the trauma when I got down and home, doing a whole month retreat patiently observing the discomfort of not wanting to be present. After staying without reacting with those difficult mind states, the mind could also not react when the pleasant was there. "If you trust awareness with the most unpleasant states of mind, that's really good practice.

Passionate states are more interesting – anger, lust – but restlessness, boredom, lethargy, they are much harder to attend to… Then through the process of using them, you know the result, you realise that you don't have any objects."

"It was like a gift. The whole of that month retreat."

"Yes, it's so simple that you realise why it's so difficult to understand. It's just being awake rather than defining it or trying to be someone who is awake. Just consciousness, here and now, but we're so complicated, so brain orientated, we want to define, understand, figure it out, do it. So we are still connected to time, to reality, to what we think we are…. All that has to drop away, by the wayside. There is consciousness and it is here and now. That's all."

And then he added, "The BBC can have these programmes on consciousness. Psychologists and experts discuss it, but none of them have a clue really, and it's so simple… I saw that at Amaravati years ago, when I was trying to figure out consciousness. I wondered, 'What does the Pali dictionary say about consciousness?' I thought I better find out and I was on my way over to the library, when suddenly I realised: I don't need to know what the Pali dictionary says about consciousness! I'm conscious! It's as simple as that! It doesn't matter what the dictionaries say, or Freud, or Jung, or anyone else!"

It was then that I finally asked him the question that had originally brought me there. "So, what's the point of pilgrimage, Luang Por?"

"You have to really strive to do something that's not easy. That's not like staying in five-star hotels; you're having to endure things you wouldn't normally have to endure in ordinary life. And you are going to holy places or sacred mountains or whatever, something inspiring. Then, inspired, you have to put forward the effort. When you have a drive-through Mount Kailash Experience, when you can go round in an oxygen bubble, it won't be the same, will it?"

"That's already starting to happen with the Indians on the ponies and those oxygen bottles the guides have…"

"Sure, it's going to happen, and a McDonald's and everything, it all changes."

But I still didn't have my answer. So I tried again. "And the effect on the mind: what is the reason for pilgrimage there?"

He was silent for a bit and then said, "It's just something we can do with life. Better than sitting watching TV all day long. It's an opportunity to see through the unconscious-driven quality. We are living, so we do something. With pilgrimages, we are going somewhere where everyone else is doing something spiritual. Like with Bodh Gaya – when I went there last year, it was crowded. In the temple, there were Japanese, Chinese, Bhutanese, Indians, and all the Theravadans: Sri Lankans, Burmese, Thais, all chanting Pali but in different styles and it was cheek by jowl, but I didn't feel confused or annoyed by it because everyone was there for the same reason. I felt the same way going round Mount Kailash with all those Tibetans. It was so inspiring: the devotion and the sense of faith, the power it gives them and the joy they have in going round this mountain, it infects you. You don't get that in a shopping mall in Bangkok! That's a totally different feeling!" And he laughed.

"That supportive atmosphere also helps you to be reflective. Doesn't it?"

"It's much harder to be reflective in a Bangkok shopping mall!" he agreed, but then added, "Pilgrimage is a very good situation for looking at real difficulty and simply staying with it. Like you did. You had to go beyond what you thought you could do. That leads to confidence and trust that your perceived limits, and what you think you are, are not necessarily real. How we create ourselves is just based on memories of the past and the ego, but we can realise we can go beyond that. We have to depend more on Dhamma than just personal feelings or comforts."

"So the result for me was not so much my drive had been reduced, but there was more trust in letting go of it?"

"That's right, more trust. That's the path, really, the eight-fold path. We are trusting Dhamma. It's not something to obtain as an object, it's an insight and that increases as we go beyond the limits

of what we are used to and comfortable with as a personality."

"So each time we face things, there is a good result and then more faith…?

"Yes, that's right," and he told me that his recent years of living in his kuti just pottering about, enjoying the result of all he'd done in England, were now changing. He felt the need to do something again, so he'd agreed to teach. "When I think about teaching, I think urghh!" and he shuddered slightly at the effect of all those previous years of constant teaching. "But when I do it, I find I like it!" And he laughed.

"Thank you, Luang Por. Very helpful."

But there's something else which I have to finish this account with. I'd asked him earlier where their pilgrimage ended in Kathmandu. "Was it Kopan Monastery again?"

"Yes, with the lama there. He was very sweet. He would hold my hand when we walked along."

"But there are two photos of you at Viswa Shanti Vihar, where we stayed….?"

"Sugato and I stayed there after Andrew flew home. It's Theravada and I knew the abbot, Venerable Jnanapurnika. He was with Doctor Revatadhamma in Birmingham. And the nun, Sister Chini, she stayed at Amaravati. She's a character! And it's right near the airport…" Then he added. "You know, there was one last irony. Just as we were getting into the car for the airport, a Nepalese woman I'd never seen before presents me with a package, gift wrapped. I take it, open it up and it's cornflakes! A packet of cornflakes! And nothing could be funnier!" He roared with laughter, then exclaimed, "Nick, there's a jokester up there!"

Acknowledgements

This book would be a much poorer thing if it were not for the comments and advice I've received from friends who read earlier versions. Rory Hodd contributed his memories of our pilgrimage, then he and Joanna McMinn read the first rough draft, followed by Sue Lunn-Rockliffe, Ajahn Amaro, Derek Murray, Rose Foley and finally Ajahn Sucitto. My other pilgrim companions and those I interviewed who accompanied Luang Por Sumedho also kindly checked what I had written. Sarah Bird then helped me reduce the text, by encouraging the removal of indulgent asides, many of which ended up in the chapter notes, and making other suggestions, and finally Jacqui and Vernon Oldfield meticulously checked it all, followed by Niamh Ó Dúill who checked the final laid out version. The book lay out and design was undertaken by Andrey Arkhutik. Sister Jinho (Chang Chwen Fashi), a Taiwanese Chan nun who teaches regularly in Ireland, introduced me to both Sarah and Andrey, and arranged the printing in Taiwan. For the printing I would like to thank The Buddha Educational Foundation and all the volunteers and devotees in that organisation. As I acknowledge in the text, the photos were taken by Rory Hodd, Ajahn Amaro, Anne Dew, David Johnson, Alison Gould, John Levy, Alex Levy and Hal Nathan.

Ajahn Asoko, the secretary to Luang Por Sumedho, was extremely helpful in facilitating my visits at times when Luang Por was free to be interviewed. I would like to thank him both for that and the considerate but light way he cares for Luang Por. On my trips to Thailand I was the guest of Vilai Kadavanich, her brother Steve (Dr Kraigsak Jaruthavee) and his wife Nina in Bangkok who would also help me journey to the monasteries.

Then there is my partner, Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, to whom I

have dedicated this book. As well as being a great companion who has been so spacious and undemanding over all these years, she has for the past eleven of them supported me so that I could convert her barn as a meditation space, teach meditation and write these books – despite not being Buddhist herself. May the result of her generosity and kindness be to know nirvana, the end of suffering.

Chapter Notes

Prologue

The Irish names for the mountains of Connemara and their translation into English come from Tim Robinson's wonderful map and gazetteer (*Connemara: A One-Inch Map, with Introduction and Gazetteer.* Folding Landscapes, 1990). The names given for the same peaks on Irish Ordnance Survey maps are Benchoona (Binn Chuanna), Allnagaighera (Binn Fhraoigh), and Garruan (Maolchnoc). These are the names recorded by the non-Irish speaking surveyors who produced the first editions and are often not the ones used by locals today. The most recent series of Irish Ordnance Survey Discovery Maps now includes many of the names Tim recorded alongside their versions. Tim's incredibly well researched maps of Connemara, the Burren and the Aran Islands and the subsequent books about their making were with me in the cottage that I climbed the mountain from. The cottage is owned by Mary and Michael Tubridy. It was Mary who was contracted by Galway County Council to undertake the survey of local Connemara lore that I refer to in Chap. 7.

Maps

I used a combination of Google Earth and Google Maps to produce the background maps but for the place names and other local information shown I used two travel guides:

Footprint Tibet Handbook, Gyurme Dorje, 4th Edition, Footprint, Bath, UK. 2009.

The Mount Kailash Trek: A Trekker's and Visitor's Guide, Sian Pritchard-Jones and Bob Gibbons. Cicerone, UK, 2007.

Chapter 1.

For more information about Lama Shenpen Hookham and her hermitage see: www.ahs.org.uk

My stop in Ruthin was with Zara Fleming, an old friend from my first ever visit to India and Nepal who went on to set up The Tibet Foundation to help preserve Tibetan culture. She now leads trips to Tibet, including Mount Kailash, and gave me excellent advice about what to see in Western Tibet and how to see it.

I have to add one other story Andrew Yeats told me – about his first trip to India in 1982, when he met Buddhism. "I did the Everest trek and there was this Buddhist monk doing it, too, from Thailand. He just had his light orange robes, sandals and a shoulder bag. So I lent him some of my thermals and we walked together. We shared my tent and I bought him food in the rest houses. I didn't know why he was doing it until we got there. At Everest I woke in the middle of the night to find him sitting there meditating. We were up in the snow and he was holding this big lump of packed snow in his hands, melting it into a bottle. He told me not to worry and to go back to sleep. He was doing it for the people back in Thailand. It was a bloody big bottle; he must have been at it all night!"

Refs:

The Tibet Guide: Central and Western Tibet, Stephen Batchelor, Wisdom Publications, Boston, US, 1998.

Chapter 2.

Ajahn Amaro is the abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in the UK. For more information on the monastery and Ajahn Amaro, to order free books by him or to download his books and recorded talks see: www.amaravati.org

Stephen Batchelor's most recent book, published just after our walk together, *After Buddhism*, Yale University Press, 2015) explores the Pali canon attempting to discern what the Buddha actualy might have taught. Reading it leads one to reconsider a lot of the basic Buddhist teaching. Yes, there is also an aspect of spiritual practise that seems to be missing but when anyone points this out I always tell them the story of once watching the Football World Cup with Stephen. I was visiting them in Devon and wanted to see the semi-final between England and Argentina. He told me to come along to Christopher Titmus' house after their

teacher's meeting for the Gaia House Meditation Centre. I walked there with Thomas, who organised Christopher's retreats in India. Arriving into Totnes we could hear the beginning of the game through the open summer windows of every house we passed. Inside Christopher's small town house, all the well-known meditation teachers associated then with Gaia House were sitting on a sofa, chairs and the floor, watching the game. That game proved to be the most emotionally traumatic England has ever played: the one in which David Beckham was sent off in extra time when felled by a tackle that he responded to by kicking the perpetrator from the ground, and England had to hold on with ten men, only to then lose on penalties. Everyone in the room was carried away with emotion, even Martine who is French and German Thomas. Christopher was so upset, he spent all of the extra time period and the penalties pacing up and down, and shouting, in the en suite kitchen. The one exception was Stephen, who sat at one end of the sofa making wry comments throughout.

For information on Stephen Batchelor's teaching, teaching schedule, books, etc. see: www.stephenbatchelor.org

Chapter 3.

Ajahn Sucitto's and my pilgrimage around the Indian Buddhist holy places which ended in the Kathmandu valley is detailed in *Rude Awakenings*, Wisdom Publications, Boston 2006 and *Great Patient One*, Amaravati Publications, Hemel Hempstead UK 2010. Both are available for free download at https://forestsangha.org

For more information on Viswa Shanti Vihar, where we stayed in Kathmandu see: www.geocities.jp/viswa_shanti_vihar

The father of Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Ajahn Amaro's friend, was Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, a much revered dzogchen master who established the monastery we visited in the Kathmandu valley, Tergar Sel Ling. His four sons who are all tulkus have two different mothers. The woman we met is the mother of Tsoknyi and Mingyur Rinpoche. Ajahn Sumedho on his second pilgrimage met one of the other brothers, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche at the monastery he runs with the fourth brother in Boudnath (see Chap. 8 notes) which was also founded by the father. I had to remove this detail from the first draft as readers unfamiliar with Tibetan Buddhism got utterly confused by all the rinpoches.

Mingyur Rinpoche eventually returned. See this interview from July 2016: www.lionsroar.com/in-exclusive-first-interview-mingyur-rinpoche-

reveals-what-happened-during-his-four-years-as-a-wandering-yogi/

Refs:

The Traditional Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley. Wolfgang Korn, 1989. Biblotheca Himalayica, series III, Volume II. Ratna Putak Bhandar, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Chapter 4.

I have used the term stupa throughout the book for simplicity's sake. The Tibetan word is chorten.

The walk with Ven. Anando (then a junior monk and so referred to as Ven.) and Ajahn Sumedho down through the Pennines in the UK was in early summer 1986. We started at Harnham Monastery in mid Northumberland where Ven. Anando was then the senior monk and finished at Malham in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. I avoided the busy Pennine Way long distance path, instead taking us through my favourite parts of the Pennines, including Upper Teesdale, Eden Valley, and Malham Tarn, which were all in glorious flower. By then I had learned that Ajahn Sumedho really liked wild flowers. Doing a walk with Ajahn Sumedho was suggested by Ven. Anando who I'd walked with the previous year, also at his suggestion, from Harnham Monastery to Manjushri Tibetan Centre in the southern Lake District. That in turn followed the three month walk I undertook with Ajahn Amaro (then also 'Ven.') in 1983 from Chithurst Monastery in Sussex to Harnham which is described in his book Tudong: The Long Road North, Bhikkhu Amaro, Chithurst Monastery, 1984 (new edition available for download at: http://www.amaravati.org/dhamma-books/tudong-the-long-road-north/).

This was the beginning of the Theravada Buddhist monks going on tudong in the UK. At the start they went with a layman who could carry money and food. It was simply time and place that led to my involvement. Ajahn Viradhammo, who was the previous senior monk at Harnham and knew I liked walking, asked me to accompany him on the first such walk in early summer 1982. We started from upper Allendale where he had been teaching a ten day retreat I had attended and we wandered across Northumberland, including over the Cheviot Hills beside the Scottish border, and finished by crossing at low tide to Holy Island off the northern coast. He then suggested I accompany Ajahn Amaro the next year walking from Chithurst to Harnham, and so it went on. I had become the chap to go on walks with. These days the monks

have learnt they don't need a layman and usually set off alone or with another monk, as they would in Thailand, and collect food each day by standing with their bowls in the towns they pass through.

Ven. Anando wanted to share this new experience of tudong in the West with his teacher, Ajahn Sumedo. It was he who arranged for a lay supporter to buy the walking boots that were too small. They were the largest available in the UK. He obtained a larger pair from the US for Ajahn Sumedho's walk the next year, 1987, with Ajahn Amaro and me. Ajahn Amaro's account of this walk is the chapter titled 'Inner Landscapes' in his book Silent Rain: Talks and Travels (Amaro Bhikkhu, Sanghapala Foundation, San Francisco 1996) which also includes some of the chapters from Tudong: The Long Road North. A digital edition of the book is available for download: www.amaravati.org/dhamma-books/silent-rain-talks-travels/

Ajahn Sumedho had the problem with boots because of a swollen foot caused by a lymphatic infection caught in Thailand. His feet were already very large so his swollen one was massive. Ajahn Sumedho would often tell the story of how that infection, in a cut he got walking over coral when living on a small Island in south Thailand, led him to abandon his attempt to run away from his duties to teach the young Western monks at Ajahn Chah's monastery (and also to meet his first disciple, Ven. Anando, in the local hospital). Ajahn Sumedho walked with a slight rolling gait because of it and he'd twisted it painfully several times, as he did on our walk through the Pyrenees mentioned in chapter 5. But he would always point out that it was thanks to the foot that he took on a life of teaching and setting up monasteries, for which he was thankful. Many doctors and therapists tried to cure it for him, but nothing ever worked. Then, when I visited him in Thailand, just after he had retired, his teaching responsibilities over, he told me a Thai doctor had just succeeded and that the swelling had finally gone.

For more information on Pema Riksal Rinpoche and his monastery, Namkha Khyung Dzong, in Yalbang, Humla, see: www.namkhyung.org

Refs:

To A Mountain in Tibet, Colin Thubron, Chatto and Windus, London, 2011.

Chapter 5.

The walk with Ajahns Sumedho and Sucitto through the Pyrenees was in 1992 and started in Lourdes where we stayed in a pilgrim's rest house

where they insisted I couldn't pay as my companions were monks – it didn't matter that they were Buddhist. Then we climbed into the French Pyrenees, going up and over ridges, through alpine meadows awash with flowers and along conifer-clad valleys. Ajahn Sumedho was tired for the first few days, worn down by his duties. His digestion was also giving him problems. At one point he simply sat down beside the track and didn't budge. Ajahn Sucitto quietly suggested we move on a bit and give him time to recover. As a consequence we arrived late into the town where I was to buy food for the meal that day. Instead I took them into the first restaurant we came to: a pizzeria. That evening by the camp fire, Ajahn Sumedho commented that he'd been having daydreams of steak and chips because of his digestion difficulty but had managed to refrain from telling me that in the town.

The next day we were back to eating cold bread and cheese, the kind of meal he was having trouble digesting, as our route took us up and along the side of a mountain. Studying the map closer, I realised by the meal time we would be passing a small mountain hotel. When we got there I suggested we eat our picnic on their patio which had half a dozen empty tables, and went inside. There was just one young guy there, both chef and manager, who said he could have three plates of steak and chips ready in twenty minutes. When I came back to pay him afterwards I explained how my companions were Buddhist monks to which he replied in a heavy French accent.

"I know. But Buddhist monks they not eat meat, non?"

When I replied that we were on holiday, he responded with a knowing Gallic shrug.

"Ah. Of course."

I did then explain that Buddhist monks can eat meat according to their rules, it's just that they usually prefer not to. But for a Frenchman the first explanation seemed to be all that was needed. Ajahn Sumedho got steadily better after that. The next day was the lightning storm I describe and two days after that we crossed into Spain.

Chapter 6.

Refs:
The Way of the White Clouds, Lama Govinda, London 1966.

Chapter 7.

It now seems possible that the visit by Father Ippolito Desideri to Tibet in the 18th century and his extensive studies of Buddhist teachings while there had a significant effect on European thinking, contributing to the Enlightenment, despite the Vatican prohibiting the publishing of his account at the time. For a fascinating explanation see *Could David Hume have known about Buddhism*, Alison Gopnik, Hume Studies, Vol 35, 5–28, 2009 and: http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/how-david-hume-helped-me-solve-my-midlife-crisis/403195/

The pattern for the saint's day on McDara's island, the one sailing boats still dip their sails for, occurs on July 16th each year. Local boats take anyone arriving at the small quay (at Ard West on the Carna peninsular in south Connemara) across to the island for a Mass led by the local clergy. Caher Island's pattern is on 15th August and it is the islanders of the adjacent Inishturk who will take you over for free in their boats, but you have to pay for the morning ferry from Roonagh to Inishturk. However, following recent visits from Irish health and safety officials the patterns only occur if the sea is calm and the boats at Ard West now only take non-locals who have brought their own lifejacket. In unsuitable weather the Mass occurs instead in Inishturk's small church and in the new lifeboat shed on Ard West pier, which I suspect is way oversized so it can also do this job.

More information on Connemara's monastic islands can be found in *A Guide to Connemaras's Early Christian Sites*. Anthony Previte, Oldchester Press, Oughterard, Co. Galway.

At the end of the trip to Morocco with Ajahn Amaro and Stephen, as we were driving back to Marrakesh and the airport, Ajahn Amaro told us that Ajahn Chah encouraged them to question everything, and that there was no orthodoxy other than the rules for living in the community. Today Ajahn Chah is usually placed within a clear line of teachers as a disciple of the famous meditation master Ajahn Mun, but actually Ajahn Chah only ever spent four days staying at Ajahn Mun's monastery.

Reading about his life, to me, it seems that Ajahn Chah worked most if it out for himself, typical of the forest tradition then: a monk simply rejected the life of the village monastery and took to wandering, practising on his own or with a small group of others. After many years of this, Ajahn Chah settled in a small patch of forest with some disciples and there he became the teacher who is known today. Perhaps this self-realised aspect is why his teaching is so clear and why it is often compared to Zen Buddhism, which like the Thai forest tradition was also originally a movement rejecting a life of study and devotion to return to a

simple life of meditation.

Today that simple practice in Thailand's forest has solidified into a tradition with its own orthodoxy. Having renounced study it is now producing innumerable books, and while once it was supported just by poor rural villagers, now it is the Thai middle class who drive to the monasteries to lavish the monks with too much support. They can now live in great comfort if they choose.

The way the Forest Tradition in Thailand has changed as it became an institution seems to be typical for religious movements. When Ajahn Sumedho first came to England the life in the first monastery, Chithurst, had to be austere, as there was little support. So if you were there, lay or monastic, you were only there for practice – it was not for a pleasant life or any sense of status. That too is now changing. The same will probably happen to the 'Secular Buddhist' tradition that Stephen sees himself as part of. I can imagine a Buddhist version of the Baptists or Quakers, conscientiously trying to be free of past orthodoxy, terribly well meaning, and politically correct, but also an institution. Religious movements always seem to ossify and slowly lose their heart and it appears to be related to how they steadily become more comfortable. The difference is that in our age change happens so much faster.

Refs:

Mission To Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S.J. Translated by Michael J. Sweet, Wisdom Publications, Boston, US, 2010.

The Sacred Mountain. John Snelling, East West Publications, London, 1983.

Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet, Sarat Chandra Das, John Murray, England, 1902.

Chapter 8.

The lama shown in the photos meeting Ajahn Sumedho in Kathmandu on his second pilgrimage would appear, amazingly, to be one of the three brothers of Ajahn Amaro's friend Tsoknyi Rinpoche whose monastery we visited in Kathmandu in Chapter 3. Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche is the head of Ka-Nying Sherub Ling Monastery at Boudnath which he runs with another brother, Tsikey Chokling Rinpoche, also a reincarnated tulku, (who is married with two sons who are also tulkus!) These two brothers, however, have a different mother than the woman we met, which may explain why this monastery's web site (http://shedrub.org/)

makes no mention of the monastery we visited in Kathmandu (see Chapter 3 notes). Presumably their mother lives, or lived, in the Boudnath monastery, which like the one we visited was founded by the father, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche.

The slides of Ajahn Sumedho's second pilgrimage also include a stop to see Milarepa's cave which is in the valley above Nyalam. We didn't have time to visit it on our return journey but I have shown it on the map for Chapter 10. There are many caves in Tibet where Milarepa, supposedly a reclusive hermit and unlikely to have done that much travelling, is meant to have lived, but this really could be the one where he composed his songs and poetry. It is the most famous, and its position just inside Tibet fits with his role in the re-introduction of Buddhism from India in the twelfth century.

A year of the Horse comes once every twelve years in the Tibetan calender. For Ajahn Sumedho's second pilgrimage in 2002 it was the Water Horse year.

Chapter 9.

An account by Ajahn Amaro of our pilgrimage appeared in the Forest Sangha Newsletter (No. 93, page 22) after we returned. His article is a good description of how the kora, and particularly the climb over the Dolma-la pass, should affect a pilgrim, rather than what happened to me. This comment by Ajhan Amaro is also of note: 'Some had been experiencing more difficulty than others (Nick had trouble sleeping and Tan Appamado had almost continuous migraines while above 13,000 feet), but none of us had altitude sickness or anything more serious.' It was only after he'd written this article that we met again and I told him what I'd in fact gone through. At the time I think only Rory guessed.

The article can be found online (note the 1997 date for Ajahn Sumedho's first pilgrimage is incorrect.): https://www.fsnewsletter.org/pdf/FSN_93_2014.pdf

Chapter 10.

The Tibetan phrase Stephen Batchelor still recalled was 'lama yin-na min-na, khong ré'.

The monastery we stopped at was Shri Dargye Ling Gompa, the old monk Ven. Khenpo Lobsang Jinpa and his nephew in Italy who asked us to make the donation was Gesh Gedun Tharchin.

The journey from Nyalam down to the Nepalese border through the untouched Himalayan forests is described by Vikram Seth who left Tibet on foot by this route in 1983 (*From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*, Vikram Seth, Vintage, 1984).

When I visited Ajahn Sumedho in Thailand our wide ranging conversation included how teachers weren't perfect. We'd been discussing the use of psychological therapy by some monastics and I'd made the point that some of the really impressive old monks one met are actually quite wacky, it's just that they have seen through that personality and don't believe it anymore. I suggested that the path was not one of becoming a whole human being, rather one of seeing that this personality is not me.

"Exactly. You don't become a saint with a halo over your head." Ajahn Sumedho replied.

"Ah, but they will want to do that with you!" I told him. "That'll be my problem with this book. I'm not interested in writing hagiography; I want to write about you as a real human being, but some of the monks aren't going to want that. Bhante, they will make you into a saint!

"Yes," he laughed, "just like Luang Por Chah, put up in the sky, way up there. Now he can do no wrong! But Luang Por Chah wasn't perfect!" And then he told me a story of how Ajahn Chah had disappointed him early on and how "it led to a great release. I could see for the first time how miserable a mental state righteous indignation is. 'You should be setting the perfect example and you disillusioned me'. Until then I really suffered with the need to be perfect."

And Ajahn Sumedho not being perfect has been a great teaching for me, too. Yes, I needed to be inspired but then I needed to be shown clearly what I needed to do, and to realise it was possible for me to do it. Ajahn Sumedho did that by openly and honestly talking about what he was dealing with himself and how he was doing it. For that I have a lasting deep gratitude. It is why I've written this book.

Glossary

Ajahn (Thai). "Teacher"; a term of respect given to monks in Thailand, whether they teach or not. In the West the monks of the Forest Tradition confine this title to all monks and nuns of ten or more years seniority.

anjali (Pali/Sanskrit). The gesture of greeting and respect used by Hindus, Buddhists and other religions of India: hands held together prayer-like.

bodhisattva (Sanskrit). "Awakened being"; a being who aspires to become a Buddha for the purpose of helping others reach the same goal.

Bon/Bonpo (Tibetan). An indigenous religion of Tibet and adjoining regions. Although having ancient roots and being quite distinct, it now shares many aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.

Chan (Chinese). A Chinese school of Mahayana Buddhism with the emphasis on simple meditation practice. It developed from the 6th century in China and then spread to Vietnam, Korea (where it is called Seon) and Japan (Zen).

deva/devata (Pali/Sanskrit). Celestial being in Buddhist cosmology.

dhal bhat (Nepali). Dhal, the dish made with lentils, spices and chilli, and bhat, rice.

dzogchen (Tibetan). Meditation practice aimed at attaining and maintaining the natural primordial state of mind. Central teaching of the

Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

gelong (Tibetan). A fully ordained monk but can be used in Tibet for any male monastic.

gompa (Tibetan). A Tibetan Buddhist temple or monastery situated in a remote place. Usually to some extent fortified.

khata (Tibetan). A traditional ceremonial scarf in Tibetan Buddhism, usually white representing purity and made of silk.

kora (Tibetan). "Circumambulation" or "revolution"; both a circular pilgrimage and a type of meditative practice in Tibet.

kuti (Pali). A single-roomed abode for a monastic to live and meditate in. Often these days they are in reality little houses.

Luang Por (Thai). "Venerable Father"; term of respect given to very senior monks. To keep things simple I've avoided using this term except when someone, including myself, uses it in speech. These days Ajahn Sumedho is referred to in Thailand and within the Forest Tradition as Luang Por Sumedho.

mala (Pali/Sanskrit). "Ornament"; such as a necklace. Today usually used for a rosary. The clicking movement of mala beads through the hand is a way of counting and supporting the chanting of mantras.

Mahayana (Sanskrit). "Great Vehicle"; the spiritual path of those who practise Buddhism for the sake of liberating all living beings. The Northern School of Buddhism that arose in India in the first centuries C.E. and subsequently spread to Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea and Mongolia. Mahayana refers to Theravada, and the other previous Buddhist schools which have now died out, as Hiniyana, "Lesser Vehicle". See also Vajrayana.

mani stones (Sanskrit & English). Stone plates, rocks or pebbles, inscribed with the six syllable mantra of Avalokiteshvara, (Om mani padme hum) as a form of prayer in Tibetan Buddhism.

muezzin (Arabic). The man who calls Muslims to prayer from the

minaret of a mosque.

naga (Pali/Sanskrit). Serpents, often hooded, that play roles in Buddhist and Hindu mythology.

nirvana (Sanskrit). Literally, extinguishing or unbinding. Freedom from the conditioning which binds you, thus extinguishing the passions of greed, hatred and delusion.

puja (Pali/Sanskrit). Act of worship or chanting.

punya (Sanskrit). "Merit"; a concept used in Buddhism and Hinduism for the benefit which accumulates as a result of doing good.

Rinpoche/rinpoche (Tibetan). "Precious one"; a title of respect given to Tibetan lamas of high rank, typically those recognised as reincarnations of earlier teachers, tulkus.

rupa (Pali). "Form"; here, a statue.

Saka Dawa (Tibetan). In Theravada, Vesakha Puja. The festival on the full moon of May, which commemorates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing into parinirvana.

sindura (Sanskrit/Tibetan). Vermilion, a brilliant red pigment made from the powdered mineral, mercury sulphide (cinnabar).

stupa (Pali/Sanskrit). A hemispherical mound usually containing relics and used as an object of devotion. In Tibet called a chorten.

subjee (Persian/Nepali/Hindi). Literally "greenness; greens"; it is used to mean any vegetable dish.

sunyata (Sanskrit). Usually translated into English as emptiness or voidness. In the Pali suttas the Buddha avoids positive descriptions of an ultimate reality (thus Buddhism is non theistic) but some terms he used for the ending of suffering, such as nirvana and sunyata, have come to be given such meaning. In Mahayana Buddhism, sunyata is the voidness that constitutes ultimate reality: it is seen not as a negation of existence but rather as the undifferentiation out of which all apparent entities,

distinctions, and dualities arise. In the Pali canon sunyata is used for the recognition of, or the dwelling in, anatta, or the absence of any self apart from the five kandhas (mental and physical elements of existence).

sutta (Pali). A scriptural text traditionally regarded as a discourse of the Buddha.

terma (Tibetan). "Treasure"; scriptures and relics retrieved from the distant past through a process of revelation.

thangka (Tibetan). A religious painting on cloth, often of a Buddha or a mandala, that is mounted on a scroll and often framed in brocade.

Theravada (Pali). "Way of the Elders"; the southern and oldest still existing school of Buddhism. Now occurs predominantly in Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Sri Lanka.

tsampa (Tibetan). Roasted barley flour, the staple food of central and western Tibet. It is usually mixed with salted Tibetan butter tea.

tudong (Thai). From the Pali dhutanga, 'means of shaking off'; i.e. the practices that emphasise renunciation allowed by the Buddha to monks. Usually it is used more narrowly as referring to the custom of walking with just a bowl containing a few essentials, a water kettle and a 'glot' – a large umbrella with mosquito-net which acts as a tent.

tulku (Tibetan). A reincarnated custodian of a specific lineage of Tibetan Buddhist teachings who is given empowerments and trained from a young age by students of his predecessor.

Vajrayana (Sanskrit). "Diamond Vehicle"; the path to enlightenment as described in the Buddhist tantras (Tibetan Buddhist texts describing an accelerated path to enlightment) and the principal form of Buddhism now in Tibet. A development of Mahayana Buddhism which makes use of mantras, visualisations and subtle energies, also known as Tantric Buddhism. For an excellent personal description of how it works and the dependence on the kind of irrational belief that Stephen Batchelor objects to see: Reflections on a Mountain Lake: a Western Nun talks on Practical Buddhism, Tenzin Palmo, Allen & Unwin. 2002.

vihara (Pali). "Dwelling"; used in early Indian Buddhism as the name for any dwelling. Today it usually means a small monastery.

Vinaya (Pali/Sanskrit). The Buddhist monastic discipline or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries.

vipassana (Pali). Penetrative insight of meditation, as distinguished from samatha, the tranquillity of meditation. This is the name also given to a Buddhist meditation movement, including the courses taught by the Burmese Indian teacher S. N. Goenka.

Wan Phra (Thai). Buddhist Holy day on the full moon, new moon and quarter moons, i.e. occurring approximately once a week. In monasteries these are days of observance when the community might sit up through the night.

yatra (Sanskrit). "Journey"; in Hinduism generally means pilgrimage to holy places.

About Nick Scott

Born in 1952, Nick grew up in London and set off east after completing his schooling in 1971. In India he became interested in Buddhist meditation practice and then went on to Thailand where he met Ajahn Chah. While staying in a Buddhist forest monastery, he realised he wanted to spend his life studying plants and following Buddhist practice. He returned to England in 1975 to undertake a BSc in Botany and then a PhD in Plant Ecology, both at Newcastle University. During this time he helped found Harnham Buddhist Monastery near his home in Northumberland and set up the Newcastle University Buddhist Society.

Nick then worked in nature conservation. For over ten years he was the manager and head warden for a project creating wetland bird reserves on the Northumberland coast. He then became a consultant ecologist, while continuing as a trustee for Harnham Monastery. He appeared often on TV and radio, particularly in North East England.

In 1983 Nick offered to accompany a young Buddhist monk, now Ajahn Amaro, abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, in walking from Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in Sussex across England to Harnham Monastery in Northumberland. The walk took three months and Ajahn Amaro's diary was published as *The Long Road North* (1984) with maps drawn by Nick. Twenty five years later they repeated the walk. This time Nick wrote an account, published as *The Long Road Has Many A Turn* (2013) with photos and afterword by Ajahn Amaro.

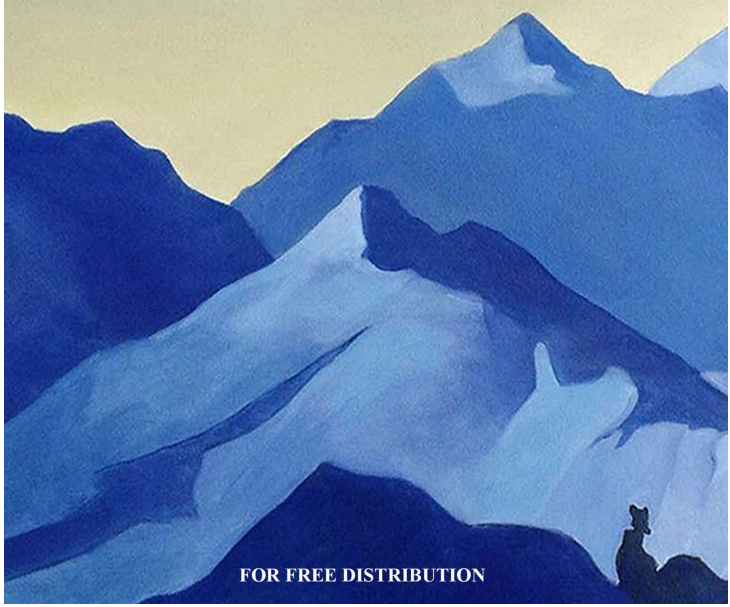
In 1990 he undertook a six month walking pilgrimage around the Buddhist holy places of India and Nepal with Ajahn Sucitto, who then became abbot of Chithurst Buddhist Monastery. In 1993 Nick joined Ajahn Sucitto at Chithurst Monastery as project manager responsible for the new Dhamma Hall, other building projects and their Hammer

Wood. They have published two books about their Indian pilgrimage written while there together. *Rude Awakenings* (Wisdom Publications, 2006) and *Great Patient One* (2010).

Since 2000 Nick has, with the blessing of the senior monks, taught meditation retreats in Europe. In 2007 he moved to Ireland's west coast to live with Micheline. He has converted a barn on her small farm to be used for meditation, where he now teaches.

Copies of Nick's books are available for free distribution from the monasteries and can be downloaded at **www.nickscottbooks.com.**

This is a book of multiple journeys, all of them spiritual, all of them entertaining. No pilgrimage is harder or more ancient than the journey up and over the Himalayan defile to circle Mount Kailash in Tibet. Ajahn Sumedho wanted to do it as a young American in 1950's California, but only got the opportunity when he was a famous Buddhist monk, aged 60. Nick Scott trained him in the European mountains and here recounts his teacher's attempts, the dire results, and Nick's own subsequant pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain which nearly killed him. So this is also a book about adversity, how to face it and what can be gained. But it's more than that. It's about the whole journey: life and how to use it, and it's difficulties, to find freedom from suffering.



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